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She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.

— Mitch McConnell, Senate Proceeding, February 8, 2017

The complexities faced by newly appointed superintendents transitioning into established organizational cultures can be daunting. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the pre- and post-arrival experiences of superintendents who used the strategic planning process upon entry as a means for establishing a new administration and facilitating change. This qualitative research followed an interpretivist approach, using semi-structured interviews to study two school districts that had undergone leadership transition at the superintendent level. Participants included two superintendents, five board members, four principals, seven central support administrators, and one consultant. The conversational style of discourse generated rich dialog and insightful discussion in which participants shared personal perspectives.

The successes and challenges of these districts are considered through the lens of a conceptual framework developed based on stage analysis, which examines the linear phases of succession and transition while integrating the strategic planning process as an element of the transition phase. The following account of these two leaders and the stories of their districts is written in an attempt to better inform practitioners on key strategies that can be utilized during the leadership transition.

STRATEGIC PLANNING: DRIVER OF CHANGE

by

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Approved by

Committee Chair

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother

Shirley Ann White Salmon

who inspired me to never give up

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The peaceful transfer of power is the cornerstone of our democracy . . . we have a responsibility to come together and find common ground. Only by recognizing and respecting the important contributions that all Americans make to our country's success can we build an inclusive and stronger future for America.

—Nancy Pelosi, House of Representatives, November 9, 2016

As the election of 2016 came to a close, the change-out of administrations and transfer of power was on the minds of many Americans. While transitions are especially significant to our democratic society, they are also a relevant subject to explore when considering the shifts in administration for newcomers to the position of public school superintendent. Similar to many elected office leadership positions, the office of public school superintendent can be characterized as a public servant. Dr. Terry Stoops with the John Locke Foundation describes the job as one that is tasked with “managing a multi-million/billion dollar operation consistent with the needs and dictates of the school board, parents, taxpayers, elected officials, government agencies, and most importantly children” (2016, p. 1). High expectations and demands are embedded in this central administrative position “from the very birth of the job . . . continuing unabated until the present” (Cuban, 1976, p. 25). Cuban (1976) compares it to that of a juggler, “who keeps a dozen objects in the air on a windy day, he constantly moves about keeping his eyes

roving – very uncertain whether he has the whole dozen but fearful of stopping to find out” (p. 26).

Additionally, the position’s scope and complexities have accelerated along with “the pace of demographic and economic change” (Bjork, Kowalski & Browne-Ferrigno, 2016, p. 2), which can be correlated with turnover in the profession. Supporting this point, the American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study concluded that “approximately half (49%) of the superintendents surveyed planned to leave their positions by 2015” (Ellerson, N. M., 2011, p. 15). Furthermore, a 2014 survey conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools revealed the average tenure of superintendents leading urban school districts is just slightly more than three years.

Considering the weight of this position’s responsibilities and the expectations for delivering continuous improvement, it is understandable that a key contributing factor of a leader’s success or failure is the capacity to make informed decisions. Against this background, the ability to make informed decisions can be especially challenging for a newly hired leader coming from outside the organization. This study examines how the strategic planning process can serve as an aid in the decision-making of incoming superintendents during their transition into the role.

Background of the Study

I began serving as a district-level administrator in 2006 in the capacity of executive director. Since that time, I have worked for four superintendents and three interim superintendents in two school districts. Regardless of the reason for a superintendent’s departure, the fact remains that leadership succession is often viewed as

a highly disruptive event that impacts the entire school district. Multiple studies point to leadership succession as the cause of disruption, which in turn can have an adverse effect on organizational performance (Barker, 2006; Grusky, 1960; Miklos, 1988). This is true in part because with each departure and new arrival comes a different personality, initiative, and vision for school improvement and leadership. Acknowledging this assumption in research related to administrative succession, Miklos (1988) states, “a change of administrators is a significant event in the history of an organization” (p. 63). Child and Kieser’s 1991 study describes the effect of leader succession on an organization by stating that “changing leaders can represent a psychological impact of a new personal style, a new definition of the situation, a new communication network with the environment, or a jolt to the system that opens its members’ minds” (as cited in Miskel and Cosgrove, 1998, p. 88). Additionally, in examining the roll of the successor, Grusky (1960) maintains the following:

With the departure of a key official from an organization goes his unique interpretations of organizational policies, his unique mode of relating to others as well as other unique role behaviors. Consequently, the entrance of a new man in to the predecessor’s position must of necessity result in some new ways of implementing policies and interpreting rules, as well as some new informal coalitions. (p. 107)

It is hard to overlook the maleness of the above quote, which was written in 1960 when the social structure of the office was one in which men typically worked in professional positions while women worked as their assistants. While the passage is culturally nuanced, it also shows that leadership succession has long been a subject of discussion that remains relevant, even by today’s standards.

Often with new leadership there is a push for change that can stem from broad expectations expressed during the hiring process or perceived areas needing improvement based upon analysis of the district. Hargreaves and Fink (2003) contend that “educational change is rarely easy, always hard to justify, and almost impossible to sustain” (p. 693). Their research indicates that most initiatives “do not move beyond the implementation phase of change, when new ideas and practices are tried for the first time, to the institutionalization phase, when new practices are integrated effortlessly” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, p. 694). Successful change requires a stable environment in which leadership and purpose are consistent over a sustained period of time. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) estimate “successful reforms require five years or more of a superintendent’s attention” (as cited in Natkin, Cooper, Fusarelli, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2002, p. 28). As a result, we often see school improvement initiatives jeopardized as changes in leadership occur. This study examines how the strategic planning process can be used as an approach for highlighting areas of focus and facilitating change with stakeholder support.

In addition to my time as district-level administrator, I have had the opportunity to work with a consultant, Dr. Robert Brooks, who advises school district leaders and assists with strategic plan development and implementation. Dr. Brooks is an experienced leader who has served as superintendent in three southeast states since 1997. He has built a distinguished career that includes being named the 2010 North Carolina Association of Educators Superintendent of the Year, and most recently, being honored with the prestigious “Order of the Long Leaf Pine” award, which recognizes North Carolinians

who have a proven record of extraordinary service to the state. This background lends credibility to the services he provides as he guides school districts through the strategic planning journey.

Dr. Brooks and I met in 2006 when the school board named him as the new superintendent and I was approved as the Executive Director of Media and Technology. I remember being in the audience for his first appearance in front of the administrative team. He spoke to us with such compassion, sincerity, and humor that by the end of his speech, I knew he was authentic. Every person in that room was ready to follow him and do whatever he needed us to do. He is an impeccable and inspiring leader who truly believes in the teaching and learning process and trying to do good for all children.

Dr. Brooks began a consulting company upon retiring as superintendent and reached out to me asking if I would be interested in assisting him with his technology and presentation needs and I was honored to help. A component of his consultation services are aimed at assisting school districts with the customized creation of a strategic plan in order to prioritize needs, initiatives, and goals. My role with his company has been to work with the assigned district personnel (usually the technology director) to create and gather district survey and demographic data as a foundation for the plan and use the data to create the presentations required for the development process.

Dr. Brooks utilizes a traditional strategic planning approach that incorporates the following foundational elements:

(a) identification of committee members from all levels of the school organization and community, definition of core purpose, and establishment of participation norms;

- (b) examination of system demographics, academic performance, overall data as it compares to the state, and review of survey results;
- (c) defining overarching focus area, system priorities, and goals;
- (d) key decisions are established, strategy and timelines agreed upon, rebranding with the creation of a new vision, mission, and tagline; and
- e) evaluation criteria, and measurements of success (See Figure 2).

The three-month process culminates with a product that the district can use as a roadmap for school improvement. To date, we have completed the process for four school systems.

All four systems shared common traits that included new leadership transitioning into a tumultuous climate and the desire to rebrand the district's image. In part, due to the nature of my work and as a consequence of my experiences assisting in the strategic planning processes, I have often wondered if the outcome produced the desired results. Did the process give the new superintendents a firmer foundation to facilitate change and generate greater buy-in that they would not have had otherwise? Is there is a common dilemma throughout the profession regarding what it takes to establish a new administration after succession?

In order to examine these questions and gain a broader understanding of how strategic planning impacted district dynamics in the wake of succession and transition, I reached out to two of the superintendents who participated in the strategic planning process conducted by Dr. Brooks. I explained my purpose and received their permission to conduct the research.

This study addresses these knowledge gaps by exploring the following three aspects of leadership transition: (a) the lived experiences of two superintendents in North Carolina who implemented a strategic planning process upon their arrival into a new district; (b) the impact of leadership succession and transition from the standpoint of district leadership; and (c) the views of the consultant who facilitated the strategic planning processes for both districts. Interview participants from district leadership were selected based on three conditions:

- the participants held positions of leadership in the prior administration;
- the participants experienced the period of change in administration succession and transition;
- the participants participated as a member of the strategic planning committee.

Statement of the Problem

The newly appointed superintendent arrives with his or her own leadership style and specific areas of focus. It is never clear whether investments and commitments made during the previous administration will continue with the new incoming superintendent, including those named as interims. There is usually little hesitation for moving forward with plans to change, reshape, and rebrand which inevitably causes disruption, unrest, and angst. Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) maintain that replacing a superintendent can be a “disruptive event because it changes the lines of communication, realigns relationships of power, affects decision-making, and generally disturbs the equilibrium of normal activities” (p. 88).

I am reminded of the saying, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast” (a quote often attributed to Peter Drucker). In the sense that cultural practices are far-reaching, deep-rooted, and firmly established within any learning organization, it is imperative for new leaders to learn the entrenched cultural nuances of the system before trying to modify or institute change. In his book, *The 48 Laws of Power*, Greene (2000) defines the 45th law of power as, “Preach the need for change, but never reform too much at once” (p. 392). He explains:

If you are new to a position of power, or an outsider trying to build a power base, make a show of respecting the old way of doing things. If change is necessary, make it feel like a gentle improvement on the past. (Greene, 2000, p. 392)

As we think about our complex educational system with its multiple layers and the needs for fostering systemic reforms, the importance of effective leadership often depends upon getting off to a successful start. In an interview with the New York Times Magazine, Dusty Baker, General Manager for San Francisco Giants, stated, “You don't win a pennant in April, but you can lose the pennant in April. You get in that hole and it's big enough, that's hard to come back from” (Smith, 1997). The same sentiment can ring true for school superintendents at the start of their tenure. While a great start doesn't necessarily guarantee a successful year, a terrible start will set the stage for a year that falls short of expectations. That's why a smooth pre- and post-arrival for new leadership is an essential component for driving progress and creating sustainable change. That said, ensuring a smooth transition between leaders is often dependent upon an organized and structured leadership succession plan. While most school boards and administrators

understand the importance of effective succession planning, few organizations have established fully developed processes for vetting and selecting new leadership. In his article, *Ending the CEO Succession Crisis*, Charan (2005) discusses the correlation between poor succession practices and negative outcomes which result in “poor performance...higher turnover and corporate instability” (p. 72).

Purpose of the Study

Superintendents are hired to set a vision and make changes in their district to create conditions for successful teaching and learning. The purpose of this study is to explore strategic planning as a vehicle for the succession, transition, and incorporation of superintendents. The study was conducted through three lines of inquiry: the first provides an understanding of the entry and transition experiences from the superintendent’s perspective; the second considers the perceptions of key district stakeholders who were present during the pre- and post-arrival phases of administration; and the third examines the role of the consultant who facilitated the strategic planning process. This analysis offers a broader-based view that provides insight regarding the effect strategic planning had on the succession and transition processes within two North Carolina school districts.

The complexities experienced by newly appointed superintendents transitioning into established organizational cultures can be daunting. James Lytle, former superintendent and professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, describes this as a “fragile time . . . History is being made, changes are looming and hopes and fears are high. A new superintendent must navigate through complexity, culture, politics,

and stakeholder expectations. It is a rigorous journey that requires careful and strategic management” (Sanaghan & Lytle, 2008, p. 2). A key component of the superintendent’s role involves meeting the expectations of a multitude of stakeholders, especially those of the school board who oversee the superintendent’s evaluation. Kowalski (2003) provides context for understanding the political nature of the job, arguing:

Many school board members want a superintendent to be both a visionary leader and a stern manager, a cunning politician and an ethical role model, a demanding boss and a compassionate colleague. When it comes to making the important decisions, these board members expect their chief executive officer to be guided by professional knowledge and by the community’s political will. (p. 43)

Superintendents entering a new district bring with them beliefs and practices from their former experiences. However, it should be recognized that by accepting the new position, they also have a responsibility to learn the organization’s culture in which they have become a member. This perspective is reflected in the writing of Amado (2018) who suggests the first objective of the leader is to not only learn how the organization functions but also learn the norms and shared values “particularly those that are hidden, the internal culture” (p. 160). Learning the culture and values helps to inform the new leader for how their decisions and actions will be received.

I am interested in discovering if the facilitation of a strategic planning process can be deemed an important instrument as part of a superintendent’s transition into the role. Central to this study are the superintendents’ perspective of their experiences. However, a main component of this research will be to learn how each district’s past leadership, culture, and history shaped the implementation and what outcomes resulted from the

process. To gain a deeper understanding of the unique situations impacting these events, I will consider multiple perspectives from key individuals who played an active role in the strategic planning processes. They will include: district administration; school board members; principals; and the consultant who facilitated the strategic planning process for both districts.

The districts identified for this study share similarities. They both used the same consultant and followed identical procedures for initiating a strategic planning process upon the superintendents' arrival into the district. These commonalities should assist in evaluating district experiences and provide further understanding of leadership succession, transition, and strategic planning processes.

Research Questions

Strategic planning has become a valuable tool in helping school districts establish desired outcomes and goals. Goals are formulated from the input of a cross-section of school and community stakeholders. According to Dr. Brooks, the consultant used by the two districts studied for this research, the strategic planning process also serves as an entry plan and blueprint for the incoming superintendent of schools. Brooks believed the strategic planning process not only allows newly appointed superintendents to establish a clear vision and goals but is also invaluable in assisting with their acclimation and transition into the district. The strategic planning experience in two districts provides context for exploring strategic planning as a vehicle for the succession, transition, and incorporation of superintendents. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are specific challenges faced by incoming superintendents upon entry and transition into an established organization?
2. How do school superintendents/administration regard their experiences with the strategic planning process as a vehicle to introduce organizational change and expectations?
3. How did the unique characteristics of the district impact the facilitation and success of the goals set forth from the strategic plan?
4. What are specific examples of change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan? How have the changes been perceived?

Significance of the Study

A review of the literature points to the high level of turnover among the nation's public school superintendents (Björk et al., 2016; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2011). In turn, this level of turnover will generate the entry of a large number of incoming superintendents who will assume vacant posts. Leadership succession and transfer of power between the outgoing superintendent and arrival of the new superintendent is a critical time to set the tone for a new administration. Barker's (2006) research on leadership succession and transition pointed to "an underestimated dimension in school improvement that provides an important opportunity to refresh an established culture and mission" (p. 290). This study is significant because it focuses on the facilitation of a strategic planning process used as part of the transition phase, as one possible avenue for establishing new leadership and addressing district needs.

This research brings together work in the areas of superintendent succession, transition, strategic planning, and change leadership. With the high rate of superintendent turnover, it would be beneficial to understand more about the potential of utilizing the strategic planning process as a means by which the new superintendent can ensure district acceptance and success in their new administration. Specifically, how might the strategic plan process be used as a mechanism for establishing a superintendent's new administration during the transition phase?

Definitions of Key Terms

The following key terms and definitions will provide context and meaning to understand the proposed study:

1. *American Association of School Administrators (AASA)* – The school superintendent's association that sets policy and drives the nations leadership agenda.
2. *Average Daily Membership (ADM)* – The number of students enrolled in a given school district. Local, state, and federal governments use this as a benchmark for funding and grants while businesses use this as a pricing structure for educational resources.
3. *Board of Education (BOE)*– Committee of directors who, in North Carolina, are elected officials who advocates for public education, and assists in directing policy and guidance for the nation's schools. The board hires and evaluates the superintendent.

4. *Entry Plan* - Identified activities used by incoming superintendents in order to facilitate, guide, or direct their upcoming tenure within the district.
5. *ESEA* – Elementary and Secondary Act. The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and reauthorized in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).
6. *Honeymoon Period* – Period of time after entry in which the new leader has the support necessary to learn, experiment, and take risks without penalty for mistakes. This phase of transition/post-arrival is usually seen as an opportunity for the successor infuse their unique leadership style in order to become established, set administrative expectations, and institute organizational changes.
7. *LEA* - Local Education Agency, also known as school districts.
8. *NCASA* – North Carolina Association of School Administrators. NCASA is an umbrella organization under which North Carolina school administrator groups are unified.
9. *Pre-arrival and Post-arrival* – Gordon and Rosen (1981) divide the process of succession into two phases: pre-arrival and post-arrival. They use the pre-arrival/post-arrival model as a “convenient way to conceptualize and categorize the many events and phenomena that interact with the process” (p. 250). The terms *post-arrival* and *transition* are used interchangeably.

10. *Socialization* – The process through which one is “taught and learns the particular knowledge and skills of an organizational role in a specific work setting” (Heck, 1995, p. 33).
 11. *Succession Process* – An organizational process in which there is a change in leadership from predecessor to successor. For this research, the term is used to provide context for events that encompass phases of pre-and post-arrival that take place between the departure of an outgoing, public school superintendent and the appointment and placement of a new, incoming public school superintendent.
 12. *Strategic Plan* – An organizational management activity that is used to align vision, goals, and priorities among an organization’s employees and stakeholders. Strategic planning identifies results, based upon an “ideal vision, to be achieved at three levels: individual, organizational, and societal” (Kaufman & Herman, 1991, p. 3).
 13. *Superintendent* – Highest ranking administrator in charge of the school system.
 14. *Transition* – The process or period of change after power has been transferred from one leader to the next. This study uses the term *transition* to signify the *post-arrival* timeframe of the succession process.
 15. *Turnover* – The rate at which employees leave the workforce and are replaced.
- It is important to note the distinction between the terms *succession* and *transition*.

The term *succession* refers to a series of events that happen within an organization when

there is a transfer of power from one leader to another. It encompasses the timeframe leading up to the planned or unplanned departure of the predecessor and continues through the hiring and placement of the successor, ending when the successor is incorporated into the organization. The term *transition* highlights the *post-arrival* period after new leadership has assumed the position (*entry*) and continues until the new leader has become fully incorporated into the organization. While the term *succession* incorporates both pre- and post-arrival events, the term *transition* only refers to post-arrival events. This study uses both terms to illustrate the different processes associated with leadership change within an organization.

According to Ortiz & Kalbus (1998), an analysis of pre- and post-arrival factors relating to superintendent succession determined that succession is “a process with indefinite starting and ending points” (p. 352). Leadership and the challenges that follow provide an opportunity to examine the entry and transition process more closely. This study will focus on the terms *succession* and *transition* in reference to the pre-arrival and post-arrival aspects of the superintendent’s new appointment. Another key aspect of this study is to point out that the implementation of the strategic planning process takes place upon entry and throughout the *transition / post-arrival* phase of new leadership.

Organization of the Study

This research study has been divided into six distinct chapters. Chapter I provides an introduction, background on the study, a statement of the problem, purpose and research questions, significance of the study, and definitions of key terms.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature within the context of the emerging conceptual framework. It is organized with the following areas of focus (a) the public school superintendency; (b) leadership succession and transition; (c) strategic planning overview; (d) various schools of thought on strategic planning; and (e) strategic planning in the educational sector. Chapter III describes the methodology for the study, including selection of participants, data collection and analysis, as well as limitations of the study.

Chapters IV and V provide an analysis of the findings. Chapter VI summarizes the results of the study, provides a presentation of the themes, addresses the research questions, implications, and offers recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In thinking about leadership succession and transition, I am reminded of the lyrics from an old song recorded by the Eagles named “New Kid in Town” (Frey, Henley, & Souther, 1976). The lines go:

There’s talk on the street; it sounds so familiar.
Great expectations, everybody’s watching you.
People you meet, they all seem to know you.
Even your old friends treat you like you’re something new.
Johnny come lately, the new kid in town.
Everybody loves you, so don’t let them down.

Interpreted from the perspective of leadership succession and transition, the lyrics describe someone new coming into a position of attention where high levels of expectations have been placed on their performance while seemingly adoring followers shower praise and work to ingratiate themselves. This interpretation also speaks to the dizzying dynamic of adapting to a new culture during which roles are realigned, alliances made, and trust developed.

As with the line in the song, *Great expectations, everybody’s watching you*, the transition period is a time when members of the organization pay attention to the newcomer’s decisions, actions, and attitude. Daly, Watkins, and Reavis (2006) discuss the significance of this phase of employment, stating:

The people who selected you did so because they expect you to add value . . . your new organization will be watching and waiting for you to establish a tempo. Key members of your new team will take their cues about the urgency and importance of their own contributions from you. (p. 2).

While it is common for a change in leadership to be highly disruptive to an organization, Daly, Watkins, and Reavis (2006) maintain that transitions can be a period for opportunity and fresh starts if managed properly. Otherwise, it can be a time of vulnerability depending on the incoming leader's preparedness. Supporting this sentiment, Bear, Benson-Armer, and McLaughlin state, "a transition can be exciting and energizing, but it can also create significant stress, uncertainty, and personal upheaval" (2000, p. 8). It is advisable for leaders in transition to prepare an agenda or course of action prior to arrival in order to provide clarity around vision, expectations, and key initiatives. Laying the groundwork paves the way for acceptance and success. Additionally, Bear, Benson-Armer, and McLaughlin (2000) claim, "Leaders who are effective during transitions are more likely to be effective throughout their tenure" (p. 8).

The phases of succession, transition, and incorporation of a superintendent's tenure can be a pivotal timeframe for establishing a new administration and setting the course for expectations and change. The development of a strategic plan may help provide a roadmap for charting a course of action as well as becoming acclimated to the new culture of the organization.

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature relevant to leadership succession, transition, and strategic planning. In order to lay the groundwork to support my research, I have provided background on the public school superintendency and

evolution of the role. This understanding gives context for my research in considering factors relating to leadership succession and transition. After providing context for these topics, I explored the multifaceted aspects of strategic planning, beginning with an overview of the history and development that gave rise to strategic planning as a management tool for the business sector. From there, I examined various perspectives from major contributors to strategic thinking before concluding with a look at strategic planning as it relates to the field of education.

The following is a synthesis of the literature review that I established based upon consistent themes found from existing research in the areas of educational leadership, organizational management, and strategic planning for change. Topics are organized within the focus areas of (a) the public school superintendency; (b) leadership succession and transition; (c) strategic planning overview; (d) various schools of thought on strategic planning; (e) and strategic planning in the educational sector. The research contained within this review forms the basis of my study and provides my framework's foundation which is concentrated around strategic planning as a vehicle for the succession, transition, and incorporation of newly hired school superintendents.

The Public School Superintendency

The State of the American School Superintendency by Thomas Glass and Louis Franceschini (2007) examines a host of issues surrounding the role of the profession of our nation's school leaders and the key issues that affect American public education. In it, they offer the following description of the position:

Superintendents play a unique and critical role being the connecting link between schools and communities represented by school boards . . . In summary, the superintendency encompasses responsibilities in instructional leadership, fiscal management, community relations, board relations, personnel management, and operations management. The role is one of both leadership and management with the district and the community. These executive directors are key players in the success or failure of the nation's reform agendas. (p. xiii)

These unique challenges are reflected in the eight American Association of School Administrators (AASA) standards, the performance criteria by which the superintendent is evaluated. They include “leadership and district culture; policy and governance; communications and community relations; organizational management; curriculum planning and development; instructional management; human resources management; and values and ethics of leadership” (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003, p. 41).

The Role's Developing Nature

The position and associated expectations of the public school superintendent have been evolving since the mid-1800s with the first district superintendents appointed in New York and Kentucky. By the end of the nineteenth century, most city school districts had created this position (Björk & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2005). Joel Spring (2005) describes the beginning expectations of the role:

The development of the role of the superintendent was important in the evolution of the hierarchical educational organization. The primary reason for creating the position was to have a person work full-time at supervising classroom instruction and assuring uniformity in the curriculum. (p. 155)

To demonstrate how the position's expectations have developed through the years, The Contemporary Superintendent (2005) highlights the following five conceptualizations, “teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and

communicator” (p.3). These descriptors “provide an essential framework for understanding the complexity of the position and the knowledge and skills required for effective practice” (Björk & Kowalski, 2005, p. 3). In referring to these conceptualizations, Kowalski and Brunner (2011) point out that “superintendents are not only expected to assume the five distinct roles, they must know when to shift emphasis from one to another . . . little is known about the variables that may be associated with the practitioner’s ability to do this.” (p. 160).

Challenges of the Position

Today’s educational environment requires the superintendent to operate within a political system where there are multiple centers of power (local, state, and federal) and special interest groups. As Kowalski (2005) describes, “having to lead in this context of competing philosophical positions and political interests is a primary reason why the position of school district superintendent is frequently portrayed as a difficult assignment” (p. 2). The superintendent’s role is complex and merges predominant school improvement reforms with the social expectations of working collaboratively at all levels of the organization and community.

Kowalski and Brunner (2011) identify several factors that contribute to “contemporary challenges” faced by the public school superintendent (p. 156). They include fiscal support, social contexts, school reform, and school board relations (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 159). While each of these factors present considerable obstacles, it is the superintendent and school board relationship that is often cited as a significant factor playing into the perceived challenges of the role (Glass, Björk, &

Brunner, 2001; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Sharp & Walter, 1997). The 2010 AASA superintendency study authored by Kowalski, McCord, and Peterson (2000) addressed political pressures arising from superintendent/board relations. The study's findings suggest "overt demonstration of political influence in the form of petitions or shows of force at a board meeting tend to dominate one's image of political pressures superintendents face" (Kowalski et al., 2000, p. 151). Multiple research studies reference the superintendent/board relationship as one of the most challenging, complex, and political aspects of the job.

In his history of the American school system, Spring (2005) points out that educational administration is founded on a top-down, business approach by which the school board and superintendent operate. This dynamic shaped the roles of each party's primary responsibility where the board was to "establish general education policies and administrators were to administer those policies without interference from the board" (p. 297). Phil Schlechty describes the school board's role in the following terms, "The role of the board member is to understand the issues deeply and to educate the community about the conditions of the schools. Board members must learn to carry on a dialog with the community" (Brandt, 1993, p. 11). Additionally, he describes the role of the superintendent as the "Chief Executive Officer of what is typically the largest single knowledge-work enterprise in the community...to be a decision causer rather than a decision maker" (Brandt, 1993, p. 11).

These delineated responsibilities have blurred as educational bureaucracy has become more politicized through the years (Glass et al., 2001; Schlechty, 1997; Spring,

2005). Glass et al. (2001) identifies overlapping roles and power struggles between boards and superintendents as leading to conflict and tensions. One mitigating approach often advised is that of building a trusting relationship between the superintendent and the school board in order to establish continuity for the efficiency and management of the school system is of critical importance (Sharpe & Walter, 1997).

Turnover in the Profession

The 2000 American Association of School Administrator (AASA) Ten-Year Study of the American School Superintendent cites key challenges attributed to the superintendency and examines how the role has evolved as “profound shifts in American life and culture have compelled schools – and their leaders – to rethink some of our basic premises of public education” (Glass, Bjork, and Brunner, 2001, p. 7). Paul Houston, Executive Director of the AASA, describes the state of America’s public schools:

The rapid increase in both number and diversity of students in our nation’s largest urban areas demands new skills of teachers and administrators. The information and knowledge explosion made possible by widespread use of the Internet makes national boundaries meaningless, even as a “digital divide” threatens to widen the gap between mainstream society and the poor. Add to this mix the national commitment to high standards and accountability, and the potential for stress in the superintendency becomes clear. (Glass, et al, 2001, p.7)

Additionally, a national survey conducted by the AASA of 13,500 school superintendents regarding perceptions of the superintendency role revealed an overall satisfactory view, but superintendents are “greatly concerned about the prospect of finding talented leaders to take their places” (Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella, 2000, p. 6). The survey’s findings shed light on the perception of turnover in the role:

Eighty-eight percent of the superintendents polled agreed that the shortage of applicants for the superintendent's job is a serious crisis in American education...while ninety-two percent are concerned that high turnover in the superintendency means a serious crisis in keeping strong leaders in the position. (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000, p. 4)

Turnover in the superintendent's role is common among districts throughout the nation, and North Carolina is no exception. A comparison of the 2015 directory of North Carolina superintendents was obtained from the state's Department of Public Instruction and compared to the 2014 listing. Data revealed that 34 school districts had transitioned leadership between May 8, 2014 and August 4, 2015. With 115 districts in North Carolina, this accounts for approximately 30% of the state's schools experiencing some form of turnover at the school district's highest level of office.

Impact of Superintendent Turnover

The departure of a district superintendent is one of the most considerable events that take place in our schools and communities. Leadership succession interrupts the progress of educational reform efforts, influences staff morale, and creates the dynamics that may negatively impact student achievement (Alsbury, 2008; Fullan, 1994; Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). As the chief executive of schools, the impact of a superintendent's resignation often has significant and long-term consequences. Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008) write, "whether by quitting or being fired, the school and community, the students, teachers, and staff lose considerable continuity and progress toward sustainable reform" (p. 299).

Leadership Succession and Transition

Outside of academia, current studies on leadership succession and transition in managerial and executive roles are plentiful (Amado, 2018; Charan, 2005; Ciampa & Dotlich, 2015; Downey, March, & Berkman, 2001; Friedman, 2017). However, research related to succession and transition in educational leadership is diverse and somewhat disconnected. One avenue scholars have examined regarding leadership succession and transition in the educational realm is by focusing on principal succession, professional socialization, and educational change (Fink & Brayman, 2004; Hart, 1993). Hart (1993) conducted an exhaustive study on principal succession and school leadership. Her research shows how succession events shape experiences between new principal leaders and established school organizations. Other examples include research exploring factors leading up to resignation (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Anderson, 2012), the impact on district performance and student achievement as a result of a resignation (Alsbury, 2008; Barker, 2006), the process and implications of leadership succession within organizations (Carey, Ogden, & Roland, 2000; Barker, 2006; Rothwell, 2010), organizational leadership succession and socialization (Hart, 1991, 1993; Heck, 1995; Leithwood, et al., 2004; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985; Ortiz & Kalbus, 1998), and establishing school and business partnerships through the use of strategic planning and superintendent leadership (Bennett & Thompson, 2011).

Leadership Succession

In most cases, the entry of a new school superintendent is preceded by the departure of the previous superintendent. The nature of this top leadership position is

“unique in scope and substance and of incomparable importance” (Charan, 2005, p. 72) and accentuates the need for creating conditions for the new superintendent to be successful in his or her role. This process, termed *leadership succession*, refers to transition of authority from one leader to another within an organization (Grusky, 1960; Hargreaves, 2005; Nestor-Baker, 2001). A common theme emerging from the reviewed research connects succession with disruption as an important event that significantly impacts the organization as a whole (Alsbury, 2008; Fullan, 1994; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985; Schlechty, 2001). Although disruptive, Barker (2006) considers succession as a key component to school improvement and suggests it provides an “opportunity to refresh an established culture and mission” (p. 290). According to Hart (1991), succession has a direct influence on effective management and formal authority. She points to Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) research that shows the effect succession has on authority and effective management. They explain that “succession amplifies the effect because the influence of the organization upon the individual peaks during passage” (as cited in Hart, 1991, p. 453).

Research identifies leadership change at the school superintendent level as one of the most significant and disruptive events a district and community experiences (Hargreaves, 2005; Miskel and Cosgrove, 1985). Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) describe disruption caused by succession as an “event that changes the line of communication, realigns relationships of power, affects decision making, and generally disturbs the equilibrium of normal activities” (p. 88). Instability and disruption are influenced by the level of office the succession occurs, in an analysis of administrative successions, Hart

(1993) contends “disruption results when an important member of the group leaves and is replaced” (p. 46). The instability created by the succession is further influenced by the predecessor and the circumstances by which they left the organization (Grusky, 1960; Hargreaves, 2005; Carlson, 1961). Hargreaves (2005) points to the disruption and discontinuity of school improvement efforts when leadership changes. Gordon and Rosen’s (1981) research suggests that a predecessor’s style can have a significant impact on the successor’s entry experiences by noting, “The personality and style of a predecessor can create lasting effects, making change by a successor difficult to achieve. . . . The popular predecessor who was all things to all people can make the successor’s job extremely difficult” (p. 238).

Studies on leadership transition point to the benefits of an entry plan that will enable the incoming leader to become acclimated to the organization while assuming the responsibilities of the position. Peter Sanaghan (2008) characterizes the superintendency transition as a “rigorous journey that requires careful and strategic management” and advises the creation of a transition map (Sanaghan & Lytle, 2008, p. 2). Whether by retirement, resignation, dismissal, or ill health, all organizations experience personnel attrition in one form or another. The importance of creating structures that support an effective succession process is a common theme that arose from a review of the literature (Carey, Ogden, & Roland, 2000; Charan, 2005; Garman & Glawe, 2004; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985).

Succession planning. Carey et al. (2000) distinguish the succession process as an “ongoing phenomenon, a measured response to a particular challenge that entails proper

planning, as opposed to a transaction or event that may take place in a crisis atmosphere” (p. 38). Garman & Glawe (2004) define it as “a structured process involving the identification and preparation of the potential successor to assume a new role” (p. 119). In order to provide a more in-depth analysis of the definition, they deconstruct the meaning of the terms *structured* and *identification and preparation* in the following way:

By *structured*, we refer to a process of having some reliable structure and/or custom, thereby excluding from the definition the more *ad hoc* or *just-in-time* identification of successors. The *identification and preparation* component of our definition is purposely left undefined as to specific methods in order to reflect the full heterogeneity of current practice. (Garman & Glawe, 2004, p. 120)

Both definitions highlight the need for a well thought out plan of preparedness rather than a reactionary process that is transactional in nature.

Succession - inside versus outside. Much of the literature associated with the topic of succession focuses on two types of succession: cultivating employees from within the organization and recruiting successors from outside the organization. The status of a successor is commonly referenced by the terms *insider* and *outsider* (Carlson, 1961; Hart, 1993; Gabarro, 1987; Coburn et al, 2008). Grusky (1960) differentiates between the two by explaining, “the amount of organizational knowledge and influence possessed by the successor is related to whether the successor is promoted from among the members of the present staff...or from another organization entirely” (p. 108).

Referring to insider status as *place-bound* and outsider status as *career-bound*, Nestor-Baker (2001) examined the differences in tacit knowledge between the insider and outsider status and the knowledge each bring to the role of superintendent. She notes that

this is a contributing factor in the hiring process, specifically if the board is searching for a candidate from inside the community or outside of the organization.

Carlson (1961) was influential in the body of work on insiders and outsiders as it related to education. He found that insiders tend to be less innovative than outsiders, indicating that outsiders are open to change. This can be attributed to the nature of an outsider having the desire to move into a new organization. Carlson's findings also suggested that school boards are likely to hire an outsider when they desire a different direction for the district. Likewise, Finkelstein et al., (2009) examined the influence of political factors as a contributing factor in the selection between that of an insider versus an outsider. As a stranger to the organization, the outsider does not arrive to the position with prior experiences, enabling them a bias-free perspective (Gabarro, 1987; Grusky, 1960; Hargreaves (2005)). Consequently, the outsider is often socially isolated.

Rothwell (2010, p. 35) addresses the importance of cultivating targeted employees from within the organization to ensure continuity and transfer of knowledge. Along with an established base of knowledge regarding the formal and informal structures of the organization, the insider has frame of reference for established norms and is already integrated into the system. Supporting the importance of continuity in the wake of succession, Hargreaves and Fink (2003) explored the challenges associated with maintaining innovative learning initiatives after a change in leadership. Alternatively, Hart (1991) recognizes that "insiders must overcome past debts and allegiances and strong preconceptions about themselves held by others, and who are fundamentally unprepared for the succession process" (p. 468).

Succession - pre- and post-arrival. By many accounts, the term succession refers to the overall process of leadership change. Gordon and Rosen (1981) divide the process of succession into two phases: pre-succession and post-succession. They use the pre- and post- model as a “convenient way to conceptualize and categorize the many events and phenomena that interact with the process” (p. 250). Their framework starts with the pre-succession stage, which examines specific events that leading up to departure and leadership change. The pre-succession phase continues into the post-succession phase of leadership. Post-succession is completed when the new leader is accepted by and has become acclimated to the organization.

In line with Gordon and Rosen’s framework, Flören (2002) breaks down the phases of succession to provide contextual understanding for the factors influencing the event. Flören’s study examining succession in family businesses outlines three phases of leadership transition. The framework includes pre-succession, succession, and post-succession events leading up to the departure of the leader (predecessor). Each phase is delineated by influencing factors that contribute to the experiences of the incoming leader (successor). The pre-succession is the time prior to the arrival of the successor but incorporates the candidate search and hiring processes. The succession phase is determined by formal acquisition of the position by the successor, which they “move through the formal hierarchy of the business” (p. 46). The final phase, post-succession, is denoted as the stage of incorporation and assessment of relationships and management of expectations. In their study on principal succession and educational change, Fink and Brayman, (2004) researched succession of educational leadership from the perspective of

the system of education as an institution, the school district, and the leadership position, all of which are associated with the internal and external environment play a significant role in leadership successes or failures.

Ortiz & Kalbus (1998) identify pre and post arrival factors integrated in the leadership succession process. They cite the following “six major factors in the pre-arrival phase: 1) set of events, 2) former leader, 3) successor’s characteristics, 4) process, 5) the match between the successor and organization, and 6) interim appointment” (p. 344). Their study takes into account the appointment of an interim position, which may or may not be permanent to the organization.

Post-arrival factors. Post-arrival factors focus on the integration of the successor into the organization after they have formally assumed and are positioned in the role. According to Ortiz & Kalbus (1998), the successor experiences three major dynamics that facilitate the assimilation process: 1) expansion of network of acquaintances; 2) increase and intensification of actions and reactions; and 3) identification and development of sources of support and dominance. Gordon and Rosen (1981) characterize this point in the process as one in which “the successor has formally assumed his or her new position and is physically located in the new job” (p. 246). They describe this stage to the “first half-hour of a blind date that has been arranged by a third party; both sides get the chance to see what the other is like” (Gordon & Rosen, 1981, p. 246). Similarly, Ortiz and Kalbus (1998) characterize post-arrival as 1) the successor learns the organization; 2) members of the organization learn the successor’s actions, and 3) leader authority, power and influence over the organization.

Gabarro's (1987) research primarily focused on the post-arrival stage and is connected to the three factors of succession identified by Gordon and Rosen (1981), which are outlined by "mutual observation in which the new manager and his group check each other out for the accuracy of perceived or expected characteristics" (p. 171). This process includes comparisons of present and past leadership. The processes looks at all aspects of the new leader actions and reactions to the organizational elements such as: problem-solving methods; coping mechanisms; informational access techniques; and general approaches to establishment of their new administration. Concluding post-arrival factors of Gabarro's (1987) framework are finalized when the newcomer has taken charge of the organization and is described by the "development of sources of power and influence, which includes sources of power the new manager is perceived as having before assuming the role as well as how he develops or acquires sources of power as he takes charge" (p. 171).

Gabarro (1987) argued that factors related to taking charge are more impactful for shaping outcomes than the conditions leading up to succession. He maintains that for leaders to authentically take charge and change outcomes, organizational and interpersonal dynamics must be present. They include "the stages of learning and action that characterize the taking-charge process; the situational and personal background factors that bear on the process; and the patterns of behavior that distinguish successful transitions from those that fail" (Gabarro, 1987, p. vii).

Succession and socialization. Research studies connecting leadership succession with socialization experiences provide insight into how socialization influences the

performance of newcomers as they become acclimated to the organization and associated responsibilities of the leadership role (Hart, 1991; Heck, 1995; Miskel and Cosgrove, 1985). Succession literature is primarily focused on ways in which leadership succession impacts organizational performance, while succession and socialization research provides insight into “how these effects occur” (Hart, 1991, p. 452).

Socialization refers to the “processes through which the individual acquires the knowledge, skills, and values needed to perform an organizational role effectively” (Heck, 1995, p. 32). Professional and organizational socialization are two characteristics discussed within the succession and socialization research. While professional socialization “teaches a person skills, knowledge, and disposition needed to be a member of the profession...organizational socialization teaches a person the knowledge, values, and behaviors required of those filling a role within a particular organization” (Hart, 1991, p. 452). It is noted that both types of socialization can coexist during the entry period. However, organizational socialization plays a much stronger role in the development of the individual (Hart, 1991; Heck, 1995; Orr, 2006). According to Orr (2006), socialization is a developmental process that “creates tensions between learning to become part of a group and helping to change their work through new ideas and creativity” (p. 1367).

Leadership Transition

According to succession and socialization studies, the newcomer begins to adapt to the new organizational culture as part of the post-arrival transition. As the highest-ranking official in the school district, it is essential for incoming leaders to become

knowledgeable about the district's culture, history, and political environment (Alsbury, 2008; Heck, 1995; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). From the moment they take office, the pressures are tremendous. Duties encompass overseeing operations and instruction while ensuring compliance, transparency, and accountability. This adjustment period requires they become familiar with the community and staff as well as day-to-day operations through the process of organizational and professional socialization (Heck, 1995). Heck defines organizational socialization as "the process through which one is taught and learns the particular knowledge and skills of an organizational role in a specific work setting" (1995, p. 33).

Along with the inherent requirements of the role, successors are often expected to make fundamental changes upon entry into the position (Gordon & Rosen, 1981; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985). The directive is usually given by the school board which want to see "changes in personnel, structure of the organization, programs, or leader responsibilities . . . superintendents often receive a mandate to break established patterns or make structural or personnel changes" (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985, p. 94). Grusky (1960) notes that succession is disruptive because it "sets the conditions for the development of new policies, disturbs the traditional norms of the organization, and promotes changes in formal and informal relationships among members of the system" (p. 105). As a consequence, "personnel are likely to feel insecure following succession and hence tension is promoted at all levels of the organization" (Grusky, 1960, p. 112). To minimize this dynamic, it is recommended that the successor begin "establishing relationships and building trust" (Sanaghan & Lytle, 2008, p. 5).

To navigate the transitional phase, leaders need to learn “which features of their organizations should be a priority for their attention” (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004, p.14). Research suggests that utilizing strategic planning methods to facilitate leadership transition can support the new superintendent in acquiring critical information regarding the needs of the district, schools, and community (Cook, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Kotter, 2007; Ortiz & Kalbus, 1998). Rothwell (2010) makes the case for strategic planning as a component of the succession post-arrival transition. He states, “Succession planning and management should support strategic planning and strategic thinking and should provide an essential starting point for management and employee development. Without it, organizations will have difficulty maintaining leadership continuity” (p. xxv).

Strategic Planning

Three areas are necessary for understanding the strategic planning process and how it can be used to facilitate leadership transitions. First, I will provide a historical perspective and explore thought-leader views of organizational strategy. It is important to understand how strategic thinking became embedded in the public school improvement processes and how tightly aligned strategic planning and educational reforms have been through the years. Second, I will compare and contrast perspectives in the area of strategic planning from major contributors to strategic thinking. Finally, I will investigate strategic planning in the educational sector. This background information will allow me to view in a wider

context the use of strategy and planning for new administration in the event of superintendency succession.

The Meaning of Strategy

The idea of using strategy to determine next steps is hardly a new concept. It has been used throughout history, dating back to Ancient Greece. In fact, the term *strategy* is derived from the Greek word *strategos* meaning army general. Hunter (2014) explains that the responsibility of a *strategos* was “for drawing up the battle plans and the effective implementation of those plans in the theatre of battle” (p. 2). From the roots of the battlefield, strategic planning has focused on devising tactics to meet visualized end goals. Using this method, strategic planning became the accepted approach to formulating business plans and policies.

Strategic planning defined. John Bryson (1988) defines strategic planning as “a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions shaping the nature and direction of an organization’s (or other entity’s) activities within legal bounds” (p. 74). Strategic planning, purposefully developed, can help organizations effectively address unanticipated changes and new situations. Central to the process is the establishment of a mission, goals, and objectives that are clearly communicated to all stakeholders (Bryson, 1988; Drucker 1993). Taking into consideration past, present, and future perspectives of vested stakeholders, the process of strategic planning serves to expose organizational challenges and opportunities and establishes a course of action for achieving the organization’s vision, mission, objectives, and goals.

There are a number of terms referenced throughout this literature review to describe change and planning. The term *strategic planning* will be used to represent organizational planning systems employed for leading change.

Thought Leaders of Organizational Strategy

The 20th century, World War II, and economic prosperity through an industrialized nation brought new views and practices for management processes and operations. Pioneers of strategic thinking and operations management began emerging with researched methodologies of planning at the corporate level (Hunter, 2014, p. 2). Michael Porter, Alfred Sloan, Fredrick Winslow Taylor, and Peter Drucker are just a few of the famous theorists and management thinkers whose contributions of the era shaped how organizations are led and managed in today's workplace. Michael Porter defined competitive strategy and advantage; Alfred Sloan, who reorganized General Motors, is known for establishing procedures for strategic planning. It is, however, Frederick Winslow Taylor and Peter Drucker in whom literature most often calls when reviewing the origins of 20th century organization theories.

Frederick Taylor and scientific management. In 1911, Fredrick Taylor published his paper *Principles of Scientific Management* and formalized principles of management in an effort to increase workplace production. He advocated for a scientific approach to processes and elimination of waste through efficiency. The intent of the paper was to highlight how systematic management can be employed as a solution to combat losses resulting from inefficient processes. Taylor (1998) believed “the best management is a true science, resting upon clearly defined laws, rules, and principles, as

a foundation” (p.1). Arguing that scientific management, which became known as *Taylorism*, could determine the proper method of doing every job, his work has been described as:

Workers in factories and business organizations have been allowed to follow their own decisions or rules of thumb for the completion of a task. Scientific management promised to replace the unsystematic actions of workers with a planned and controlled work environment. (Spring, 2005, p. 294)

His principles called for streamlining industrial production so that people could work as quickly and efficiently as possible. The Taylorism methodology translated into a systematic approach of dividing tasks into a series of smaller parts, which could be examined and easily taught.

Robert Kanigel's biography of Taylor, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency* (2005), highlights the controversial nature of the concept of scientific management. In one sense, his contributions aided workplace efficiency by training unskilled workers, increasing workplace readiness, and raising the standard of living during the industrialized age as well as a time of war. Peter Drucker, for instance, credited Taylor's efficiency principles for aiding in the war efforts. Drucker (1973) explained how the United States, during World War II, applied the principles of scientific management to its training efforts, thereby creating an industrial workforce. He states:

Training-based scientific management gave the U.S. civilian worker more than twice – if not three times – the productivity of the workers in Hitler's Germany . . . thus giving the United States the capacity to outnumber both Germans and

Japanese on the battlefield and yet to out produce both by several orders of magnitude. (p. 194)

Critics worried that Taylorism encouraged non-questioning obedience and compliance through impersonal operations. This method often disenfranchised the employee's personal ownership in their work, devalued relationships, and reinforced the idea of class domination where fragmented power and dominance is held over the compliant, front-line workers by the educated, managerial elite (Hounshell, 1998; Kiechel, 2012).

Taylor's focus on improving productivity through science "set off a century-long quest for the right balance between the 'things of production' and the 'humanity of production' as the key tension that has defined management thinking" (Kiechel, 2012, p.1). Kanigel (2005) reinforces this opinion regarding Taylor's impact on history by stating, "The coming of Taylorism made our age what it was going to become anyway -- only more so, more quickly, more irrevocably" (p. 570). Taylor laid the groundwork for organizational and strategic planning through his time and motion concepts of streamlining processes and increasing efficiency.

Peter Drucker, modern management, and the advent of strategic planning.

A review of the literature shows that the use of strategic planning in the public sector dates back to the mid-1950s. As prosperity and competition grew, large corporations were looking for innovative ways to leverage resources and human capital and increase profit margins. There was also an emerging business movement toward social responsibility during this time. Peter Drucker, who was professor of management at New York University and consultant to some of the largest corporations in America, was just

arriving on the scene as an innovator and scholar in the field management and organizational structure.

His first book, *The Practice of Management*, published in 1954, “was a turning point in the development of the discipline of management” (Zahra, 2003, p. 16).

Drucker, known as the founder of modern management and self-described social ecologist, held the perspective that the “business organization is a human and social organization – a community in and through which the worker could find purpose and meaning in life” (Kurzynski, 2009, p. 359). He believed “managers should follow a systematic decision-making process that focuses on: defining the problem, developing alternatives, examining the merits and shortcomings of these alternatives, selecting the approach to be followed, implementation, and using feedback” (Zahra, 2003, p. 17).

In 1959 Drucker coined the term *knowledge worker* to describe new ways of thinking about management and organizations in an economy that capitalizes on ideas and information. In explaining the concept of the *knowledge worker*, Drucker states:

In 1900 the largest single group, indeed still the majority, of the American people, was rural and made a living on the farm. By 1940, the largest single group, by far, were industrial workers, especially semi-skilled (in fact, essentially unskilled) machine operators. By 1960, the largest single group was what the census called ‘professional, managerial, and technical people’, that is, knowledge workers. (1993, p. 248)

Prophetically, Drucker predicted that by the late 1970’s, “every other dollar earned and spent in the American economy will be earned by producing and distributing ideas and information and will be spent on procuring ideas and information” (1992, p. 263).

Drucker tied knowledge work to strategy, which had become the trend among management and businesses of the 20th century. Jeffrey Krames (2008) interviewed Drucker in 2003 for his book, *Inside Drucker's Brain*. In it, Drucker discusses how strategy is formulated:

Only a clear definition of the mission makes possible clear and realistic business objectives. It is the starting point for the design of managerial jobs, and, above all, for the design of managerial structures. Structure follows strategy. Strategy determines what the key activities are in a given business. And strategy requires knowing what our business is and what it should be. (p. 162)

Drucker argued, “the single most important cause of business failure can be attributed to the management’s failure to ask the question, ‘What is our business?’ in a clear and sharp form” (Krames, 2008, p. 163).

Peter Drucker’s (1993) book, *The Five Most Important Questions*, outlines the following five questions that serve as a template for organizational strategy (p. 77):

1. What is our plan?
2. What is our mission?
3. What are our goals?
4. What is our plan to achieve results for the organization?
5. How will we communicate our mission, plan, and results?

The essential design is a continuous, circular, planning process that culminates in the identification of the following outcomes that include mission, goals, objectives, action steps, budget, and appraisal. Drucker’s templates have served as a structured workflow for organizations seeking to establish direction in order to reach desired outcomes.

It is clear that researchers such as Drucker, Bryson, and Porter have influenced the use and progression of strategic planning and strategy formation. While the adoption of this type of visionary planning became commonplace in the business world, it was slower to move into the education sector.

Various Schools of Thought

Literature on strategic planning is as broad as it is deep. There are multiple and conflicting perspectives surrounding the concept of strategic planning, as well as the use of the terms *strategy* and *planning*. Eacott , 2010; Fullan, 1994; Kotter, 2007; Mintzberg, 1994; and Schmoker, 2004 each discuss the conflict arising from the interpretation of the terms and acknowledge the division it has created. As Eacott states, “one of the greatest weaknesses in the literature has been the striking lack of precision in the use of the term and even what constitutes the concept. As a result, the term *strategy* remains frustrating, elusive, and considerably misunderstood” (2010, p. 425).

Strategy for transformation. John Kotter (2007), author, retired Harvard Business professor, and authority on change management, discusses reasons why companies engage in organizational change. He states:

I’ve watched more than 100 companies try to remake themselves into significantly better competitors. These efforts have gone under many banners: total quality management, reengineering, rightsizing, restructuring, cultural change, and turnaround. But in almost every case, the basic goal has been the same: to make fundamental changes in how business is conducted in order to help cope with a new, more challenging market environment. (p. 2)

The literature reflects that both advocates and opponents of strategic planning agree with this sentiment regarding the reasons for transformation. However, there are heated

debates from both sides of the aisle regarding the use of strategic planning as an effective tool for making change happen.

Conventional thoughts. There are many views of the concept of strategy, its purpose, and its effectiveness. Kotter (2007) argues, “The change process goes through a series of phases...Skipping steps create only the illusion of speed and never produces a satisfying result” (p. 96). He employs a conventional position regarding strategic planning for organizational change and subscribes to an eight-step process that includes:

(1) establishing a sense of urgency; (2) creating a powerful guiding coalition; (3) creating a vision; (4) over-communicating the vision; (5) empowering others to act on the vision and removing obstacles to the new vision; (6) systematically planning for and creating short-term wins; (7) consolidating improvements, producing more change and not declaring victory too soon; and (8) institutionalizing new approaches by anchoring changes in the corporation’s culture. (Kotter, 2007, p. 98).

He suggests that leaders should create or use an opportunity or crisis to make a call for change. Only when there is a sense of urgency created will stakeholders recognize that change is needed.

For the second step of the process, Kotter recommends forming a powerful, guiding coalition comprised of 15 to 50 powerful individuals. He uses the term *powerful* to describe individuals who hold title, information, expertise, reputations, and relationships. He explains how the group “develops a shared assessment of the company’s problems and opportunities during off-site retreats planned over a period of time. Step three through eight adheres to the traditional school of thought regarding creation of the company’s objectives, goals, and vision in order to create cultural change.

Henry Mintzberg, a professor and author of *The Rise and Fall of Strategic*

Planning, counters this conventional approach by cynically describing the process:

The label ‘strategic planning’ has been applied to all kinds of activities, such as going off to an informal retreat in the mountains to talk about strategy. But call that activity ‘planning’, let the conventional planners organize it, and watch how quickly the event becomes formalized (mission statements in the morning, assessment of corporate strengths and weaknesses in the afternoon, strategies carefully articulated by 5 p.m. (1994, p. 3)

Mintzberg favors the term strategic thinking rather than planning. He states, “Strategic planning, as it has been practiced, has really been strategic programming, the articulation, and elaboration of strategies, or visions, that already exist” (1994, p. 2).

Without vision, there is no strategy. While Mintzberg may have a different opinion regarding the term *planning*, he shares Kotter’s belief in the importance of vision as a key factor of strategy. Mintzberg believes “the most successful strategies are visions, not plans” (1994, p. 1). He describes the strategy-making processes as, “capturing what the manager learns from all sources...and then synthesizing that learning into a vision of direction that the business should pursue” (p. 2).

Cook (2004) also agrees and suggests that strategic planning “assumes that the locus of control is inside the organization. It perceives the future, not as some received or conjured ‘vision’, but as an irrevocable commitment to purpose beyond the ordinary” (p. 74). By establishing a clear vision, future direction of the organization can achieve remarkable accomplishments, “resulting in a completely new way of thinking and acting” (Cook, 2004, p. 83).

Strategic planning versus strategic management. William Cook criticizes opponents for not “remaining true to the original concept” (2004, p. 73) of the term *strategic planning* and underscores its value. Cook believes that the meaning of the term *strategic planning* has tragically become mixed with *strategic management*. He writes, it “became distorted by refracting it through the prism of the corporation and, of necessity, interpreting it in the context of management” (p. 83). He outlines the differences between the two concepts in the following explanation:

Management is about compliance; strategy is about creation. Management is about rationalistic science; strategy requires intuitive imagination. Management is about probability; strategy is about possibility. Management is about preserving the existing order; strategy is about destroying existing structures to generate new formations. Management is about implementation; strategy is about creating capacity for constant emergence. (2004, p. 74)

Cook’s perspective on the differences between *management* and *strategy* closely align with the thoughts of Warren Bennis regarding the difference between *management* and *leadership*. In fact, each of Cook’s five comparisons are embedded in the list Bennis created. In his book, *On Becoming a Leader* (1989, p. 42), Bennis lists 12 differences between the two terms:

1. The manager administers; the leader innovates.
2. The manager is a copy; the leader is an original.
3. The manager maintains; the leader develops.
4. The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people.
5. The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.
6. The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective.

7. The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why.
8. The manager has his or her eye always on the bottom line; the leader's eye is on the horizon.
9. The manager imitates; the leader originates.
10. The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.
11. The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader is his or her own person.
12. The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing.

It is important to understand that leadership and management are connected and exist together. One without the other would not be beneficial to the organization. Taylor and De Lourdes Machado (2006) further explain the relationship by stating, "Each depends on the other for support and to provide the institution with the multifaceted decision-making, policy development and administrative roles necessary to function effectively" (p. 138).

Strategic planning versus strategic thinking. Mintzberg challenges the notion of strategic planning and advocates for "dropping the label 'strategic planning' altogether" (1994, p. 9). He bases his critique of the word *planning* on the argument that plans require forecasting. Making future predictions within a constantly changing environment often leads to planning failure. In support of this argument, Schmoker (2004) notes, "authentic strategic planning is emphatically future-oriented; this is the very element that makes it vulnerable to all kinds of mischief, that prevents a timelier concern with specific, short-term efforts that respond thoughtfully to emergent opportunities and problems" (p. 84-85). Schmoker (2004), like Mintzberg, believes the term is flawed and

attributes the interpretation of its meaning to many failed school improvement initiatives. He writes, “The term ‘strategic planning’ as it is actually used and implemented has delayed and prevented improvement in an enormous number of schools and organizations...it is time for a serious critique of ‘planning’ in its most popular forms” (Schmoker, 2004, p. 85).

Summarizing the conventional approach to strategic planning, Mintzberg characterizes the process by identifying the following four key areas: objectives, budgets, strategies, and programs. From this characterization, he concludes that strategic planning is “a numbers game geared to motivation and control, capital budgeting, and a process that seems to be about strategy making but is largely unspecified” (Capon, 1996, 298).

Mintzberg argues that the process of strategy-making calls for “insight, creativity, and synthesis – and above all, integration; whereas planning focuses on analysis and decomposition” (Capon, 1996, p. 299). Both Mintzberg and Schmoker endorse a grassroots, bottom-up approach to creating change rather than “overly formalistic long-term planning processes” (Capon, 1996, 301) headed by top-level leaders.

In her book, *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools that Work*, Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) discusses actions for school reform and restructuring. She endorses efforts that begin with “school-based management and shared decision making intended to encourage bottom-up initiative and ownership of change” (p. 147). While she cites these as good starting points, she also highlights the importance of having structures in place to support schools in developing “a capacity to innovate and learn from collective experience” (p. 147). The successful organizational structures that

Darling-Hammond references blend seamlessly with the framework for professional learning communities.

Continuous collaboration and communities versus strategic planning.

Schmoker (2004) suggests the correct way to create organizational change and educational reform begins at the classroom level. He believes that authentic, continuous collaboration and sharing among teacher teams is the key to school improvement. These learning communities, he attests, “represent something truly superior to other innovations” (Schmoker, 2004, p. 85). Central to the learning communities is the significance of collaboration and teams. Fullan (1994) shares this point of view and emphasizes its importance in his book *Change Forces*:

Collaboration is essential for personal learning. There is a ceiling effect to how much we can learn if we keep to ourselves. The ability to collaborate is becoming one of the core requisites of postmodern society...without collaborative skills and relationships, it is not possible to learn and to continue to learn as much as you need in order to be an agent for societal improvement. (p. 17-18)

The *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998) introduced the concept of professional learning communities (PLC) as “the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement” (p. xi). In describing key aspects of a professional learning community, DuFour and Eaker (1998), identify the following six characteristics:

1. Shared mission, vision, and values for a “collective commitment to guiding principles” (p. 25).

2. Collective inquiry “serves as the engine of improvement, growth, and renewal” (p. 25) and involves “reflection, shared insights, joint planning and coordinated action” (p. 26).
3. Collaborative teams that “share a common purpose and learn from one another, thus creating momentum to fuel continued improvement” (p. 27).
4. Action orientation and experimentation where “seemingly chaotic activity is preferred to orderly, passive inaction” (p. 27). Committed team members “turn aspirations into action and visions into reality...they not only do they act” (p. 27).
5. Continuous improvement means that members of the community challenge the “status quo” (p. 28) requires members to consistently address four questions (p. 28):
 - a. What is our fundamental purpose?
 - b. What do we hope to achieve?
 - c. What are our strategies for becoming better?
 - d. What criteria will we use to assess our improvement?
6. Results orientation is the final characteristic of the professional learning community and is “assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions” (p. 29).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) compare organizational change efforts between business/industry and schools. They point to the fact that “teachers and administrators have no control over who their ‘customers’ are or will be...and must take all students,

regardless of their abilities or levels of support from parents and community” (p xiii).

While underscoring that these differences must not be overlooked or minimized, they also acknowledge, “organizations outside of education have struggled with some of the same issues that public schools face today” (xiv).

Many of the characteristics and principles of a professional learning community’s framework are derived from lessons learned by these organizations. In fact, the literature reveals a high level of crossover between PLC’s and strategic planning. As an example, the fifth characteristic regarding continuous improvement instills four questions to be consistently and continually addressed. These questions could easily be reframed using conventional terms associated with strategic planning:

- a. The question, “What is our fundamental purpose?” could be relabeled as a mission.
- b. The question, “What do we hope to achieve?” could be relabeled to as an objective.
- c. The question, “What are our strategies for becoming better?” could be relabeled to as action steps.
- d. The question, “What criteria will we use to assess our improvement?” could be relabeled to as appraisal.

In spite of a lack of clarity surrounding the term *strategic planning*, the foundational features remain intact. Like diet plans that successfully result in healthy weight loss, the basic elements of calorie reduction and exercise remains the same; the fundamental premise of strategic planning models are consistently tied back to visionary

leadership, buy-in, and commitment. As with diet plans, most strategic planning models have similar approaches, shared ingredients, and synonymous meanings with the main difference being found in the terminology or vocabulary. Interpretation of the multiple models represented in this review (e.g., Cook, 2004; Drucker, 1993; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Kotter, 2007; and Mintzberg, 1994) support this conclusion.

Strategic Planning in the Educational Sector

Background. The process of strategic planning as a management tool began trending in higher education in the early 1980s and reached popularity in the public K-12 education sector in the late 1980s and early 1990s. David Conley's exploratory study on strategic planning in America's schools discusses how districts, during this time, would use this formal planning model for operational processes rather than instructional planning. He credits "operational dimensions of school districts, particularly capital improvement projects and new construction which lend themselves much more to linear planning and for which highly-developed planning models exist" (1992, p. 3).

Conley explains how the use of strategic planning rose in acceptance among educators who worked to apply successful business models within the instructional arena. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) promoted the use of strategic planning in education and sponsored Bill Cook and Shirley McCune as their national consultants (Conley, 1992). This type of coverage, in addition to "increasing pressure for reform, revitalization, and restructuring of American education" (Conley, 1992, p. 2) promoted the method as a tool for creating fundamental change in public schools.

The call for educational reforms came in the shape of new accountability measures. The implementation of federal and state legislation that ties funding to school improvement have created the need for organizational change within school districts. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) refer to this type of organizational change as *coercive pressure* coming from outside the organization. They explain these *isomorphic* influences as “pressures from state agencies that require schools to adopt particular practices, standards, and structures that are also reinforced by cultural expectations of the larger society” (as cited in Bennett & Thompson, 2011, p. 830), as is the case where school districts are required to focus toward compliance with accountability measures at the expense of other important priorities.

Strategic planning and educational reforms. Strategic planning and school improvement are two terms that seem to go hand-in-hand throughout the literature reviewed (D’Amico, 1988; Duffy, 1997; Kauffman & Herman, 1991; Schlechty, 1997). In 2010, the Southern Regional Education Board’s (SREB) published research on leadership factors that positively impact school reform efforts. The findings cite strategic planning processes as key to school improvement (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010, p. 3).

Major policy initiatives, federal mandates, and funding incentives have promised to improve our nation’s schools while assigning districts with the task of implementation. Examples include President Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 which addressed concerns of poverty and civil liberties through special education programs (Spring, 2005, p. 375); President Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

legislation of 2001 which “brought to the forefront issues of standardization, testing, minority cultures, and moral education at a time when the school was educating workers for a global economy and consumerism” (Spring, 2005, p. 441); and recently President Obama’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grant initiative and his 2010 blueprint for reform with the reauthorization of ESEA which focuses on four main areas of concern. The 2010 proposal to reauthorize ESEA employed measures that increase teacher and principal standards, improve options for school choice, implement college-and career-ready standards and expand interventions and support for our nation’s lowest performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 3). Signed on December 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was the culminating law that served as the official reauthorization of ESEA. ESSA, described as a “U-turn from the current, much –maligned version of the ESEA law” (Klein, 2015, p.1) maintained a modified version of the federal testing mandates and academic accountability systems. Often school districts have employed strategic planning and management techniques to address implementation of these reforms.

Literature points to NCLB as a significant reform period in which federally driven accountability standards measured gaps in student achievement. It also instituted sanctions on states that failed to reduce achievement gaps (Spring, 2005, p. 462). This was a turning point for American education as it kicked off the use of data to measure success and failure of public school districts. Both No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top sought to raise educational standards through the use of data to evaluate schools, students, teachers, and principals.

The consequences of a data-driven, educational environment in the name of accountability and student achievement have been the focus of multiple studies (Fullan, 2007; Popham, 2004; Ravitch, 2010). The underlying expectation is that data will be used to inform policy and practice in order to improve schools. Identifying, tracking, and documenting data in order to stay in compliance with state and federal mandates created an environment that led to the rise of strategic planning processes. Eacott (2010) supports this view and expounds upon reasons for the use of strategy within educational leadership:

First, as governments encourage an enterprising culture in the delivery of education, as built on a market ideology and explicitly linking economic prosperity with student achievement, the relationship between school leadership and society moves beyond the mere instruction of children toward a greater level of interdependence. Second, scholarship on the strategic role of the school leader has tended to follow practitioner trends (e.g., legislative changes mandating that schools produce strategic plans), the conceptual development of the term strategy within the field has been significantly stifled. (p. 425-426)

Strategic plans: return on investment. A proponent of using learning communities in place of the traditional process of strategic planning, Schmoker (2004) maintains that many districts overestimate the impact of the process. In his 1980s research, Schmoker recalls:

We wound up setting an impossible number of "goals," even as the word was used almost interchangeably with "action steps" or "objectives." Even the "evaluation" or "results" columns were often indistinguishable from the "goals" and "action steps"—as mere implementation or training was used as evidence of having met a goal. Nonetheless, these annual plans, like the hundreds I've seen since then, were approved pro forma. There was real fear of criticizing their content and so alienating any of the numerous constituents who had spent their

valuable time producing them. Instructional quality—and levels of achievement—were typically unaffected by any of these processes. (p. 426)

Other investigations see value in the process. Developing, leading, and sustaining organizational change requires strategic leadership (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010) and critical to the role is the “presence of commonly shared goals, values, and norms that demarcate members of an organization” (Eacott, 2010, p. 426).

Kotter (2007) suggests that education is hardly unique in failing to transform strategy into action, concluding that more than 70 percent of business strategic plans are never implemented. He emphasizes the premise that school leaders need guidance to engage in rational planning processes that lead to improved student results. This was the situation reported in the study performed by Bennett & Thompson (2011). The case study noted the following: “The problem was that the current school district strategic plan was rather outdated and not well utilized, the plan was locked up in a cabinet somewhere and covered with dust” (p. 844). While this is a common story for many strategic plan efforts, it should also be recognized that the process can be beneficial if approached with fidelity and purpose. In this case study (Bennett & Thompson, 2011), the superintendent “felt that for a plan to be meaningful, it needed community ownership, and the way to achieve this was to involve them in the creation” (p. 844) of developing a new strategic plan.

Strategic planning, at its most basic level, informs organizational stakeholders. Kaufman & Herman (1991) write, “In its most powerful use, strategic planning identifies results, based upon an “ideal” vision, to be achieved at three levels: individual,

organizational, and societal” (p. 3). As Schlechty (1997) observes, “even when it is done or used improperly, strategic planning can serve important functions for those who want to maintain the status quo” (p. 61).

Summary

In summary, the review of literature reveals that challenges faced by today’s superintendents are complex and multifaceted, requiring them to operate within a stressful environment of ever increasing expectations and diminishing resources. This view is supported by national studies that portray the position as constantly changing with competing demands and pressures. However, the research also indicated high levels of job satisfaction with regard to the meaningful and rewarding aspects of serving others as well as the opportunity to positively impact teaching and learning processes (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2001; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski, McCord, & Peterson; 2000).

While a large majority of the research reviewed reflected various approaches for educational reform and capacity building through models of leadership; relatively little research can be located that explores the experiences of incoming superintendents who use the strategic planning process as a means for establishing priorities by bringing together stakeholders to identify common goals and outcomes for a new administration. Finally, findings on the topic of superintendent succession returned research focusing on factors relating to superintendent turnover, transition, and succession. These factors were studied in relation to topics on: (a) student achievement, (b) school board relations, and

(c) impact on staff and community (Alsbury, 2008; Barker, 2006; Grissom & Anderson, 2012).

Upon further review of the literature, gaps were identified relating to the use of strategic planning as a transition tool for superintendents new to the school district. Further research is clearly needed in order to identify specific strategies that can be employed in the post-arrival stages of a superintendent's tenure that foster the leader's assimilation into the organization and encourage success for all district stakeholders.

Conceptual Framework

Overarching topics examined for this study included leadership succession, transition, change initiatives, and strategic planning. A review of the literature helps us to recognize that in order for fundamental change to occur within a learning organization, an evaluation of systems and processes with a focus on strategic thinking and design are required. Assuming the role of a school district's "chief executive" position often calls for the incoming superintendent to devise a roadmap to establish and steer the course for a new administration.

Stage Framework

The numerous studies encompassed within this exploration allowed me to align key areas of research ranging from leadership succession and transition to strategic planning. Analyzing themes and patterns that emerged from the literature contributed to the development of a conceptual framework. This process shaped the design and direction of my research and guided its development.

Hart (1993) discusses four branches of leadership succession research with the fourth branch of study being the “delineation of the stages through which the process of succession takes place across time” (p. 43). Using stage analysis as the foundation of my conceptual framework provided me an avenue for analyzing pre- and post-arrival stages of succession in conjunction with the implementation of a strategic planning process during the post-arrival phase of transition. Hart (1991) explains how scholars use stage framework to identify stages of socialization:

Socialization experiences are viewed as linear or cyclical. Linear models portray leaders moving along a continuum until they reach equilibrium and integration. Iterative perspectives see the stages cycling perpetually. Various labels are attached but scholars return to three common stages that identify learning and uncertainty, gradual adjustment foreshadowing outcomes, and stabilization. (p. 458)

Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) use stage frameworks in their review of leadership succession within an educational setting. They incorporate the variables previously listed but add another dimension, “the interaction of multidirectional effects shaping the process and outcomes of succession” (as cited in Hart, 1991, p. 458). Leithwood, Steinbach, and Begley (1992) also use stage frameworks to identify the initial entry of a successor and refer to the stages as initiation, transition, and incorporation. Gabarro (1987) utilized stage frameworks to report findings from his study on newly hired managers. Focusing on the post-arrival phase of succession, his work defined benchmarks associated with succession after the successor had formally assumed their position. Gabarro (1987, p. 34) outlined the following five stages of leader succession: (1) taking hold, (2) immersion, (3) reshaping, (4) consolidation, and (5) refinement. He

contended that each factor relates to activities relevant to leading an organization.

Gabarro's work followed that of Gordon and Rosen (1981) who identified the following stages of succession: pre-succession, succession, and post-succession. Scholars using stage frameworks recognize the interaction of factors pertinent to succession. Review of literature highlights succession as a dynamic event that is impacted by a multitude of variables involving all members of the organization.

As with the researchers mentioned above, I am using the stage framework model to identify phases of leadership succession. The illustration highlights factors relating to the linear stages of pre-arrival, successor entry, post-arrival transition, and incorporation while integrating the strategic planning process as an element of post-arrival and an offshoot of the transition phase (See Figure 1). By incorporating the strategic planning process used by the consultant, Dr. Brooks, the visual depicts how the process bi-directionally integrates with the transition phase, ultimately influencing the final stage of incorporation.

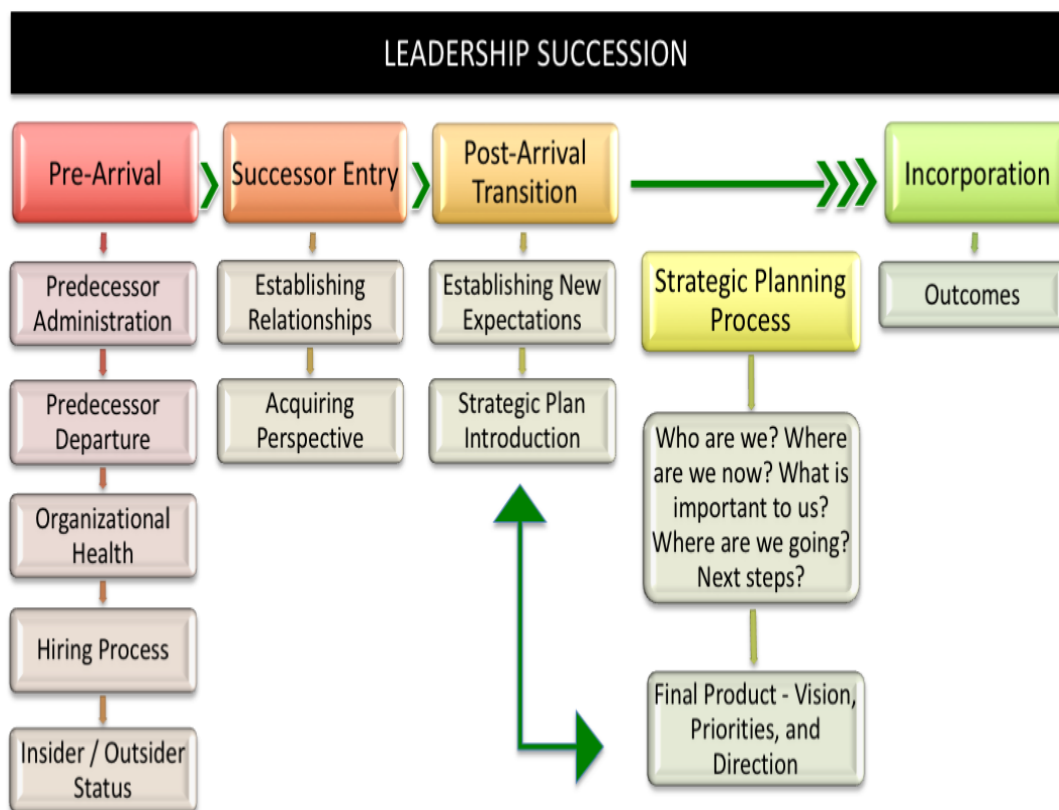


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Based on Stage Analysis.

The framework was developed to broaden and deepen understanding of how public school superintendents might begin a new leadership role in such a way that they are able to learn about and understand the district and organizational challenges they are facing as well as establish trust and collaborative relationships with school community stakeholders from the beginning of their administration. Connected to existing knowledge on succession events and strategic planning, the research was organized to examine the use of strategic planning as a means to establish new administration in the wake of leadership succession.

I will use this framework to examine what happened in the two districts I studied by exploring the experiences of incoming superintendents and their administration who worked through the events of succession and transition. As a component of succession, I examine how the strategic planning process can assist in the transition of leadership in order to build relationships, learn the organization, establish new administrations, and map out a vision for change. The framework will also be used as a guide for interpretation of the study's findings.

Strategic planning design. The framework below is a representation of the strategic planning process followed by both districts and derived from researchers in the field such as Peter Drucker and Michael Kotter. The process employs a conventional strategic planning approach while integrating educational components that include: (a) identification of committee members from all levels of the school organization and community, define purpose, and establish participation norms; (b) examination of system demographics, academic performance, overall data as it compares to the state, and review of survey results; (c) defining overarching focus area, system priorities, and goals; (d) key decisions are established, strategy and timelines agreed upon, creation of a new vision, mission statement, and tagline, and e) evaluation criteria, and measurements of success. As recognized in the literature, the fundamental premise of model requires visionary leadership, buy-in, and commitment that culminates with a product that can be used as a roadmap for organizational improvement.

Steps of the process. Prior to implementation, each superintendent had preliminary meetings with Dr. Brooks in order to discuss meeting logistics such as

format, dates, and locations. However, the main purpose of the pre-meeting consultations were to customize the process in order to meet the unique needs of the districts. These conversations primarily focused on answering the following three questions:

- 1) What is the purpose of the district?
- 2) Who are the invested stakeholders of the district?
- 3) What questions need to be asked of the district?

Additionally, the preliminary sessions focused on identifying key school and community stakeholders with whom the superintendents would benefit from establishing relations with, especially during their leadership transition. Both district team members consisted of a cross section of the school community that included board members, central support staff, principals, teachers, and students. While each district had different characteristics and challenges, both processes were organized using the same basic questions that included: “Who are we?”, “Where are we?”, “What is important to us?”, “Where are we going?”, and “What are our next steps?”. (See Figure 2)

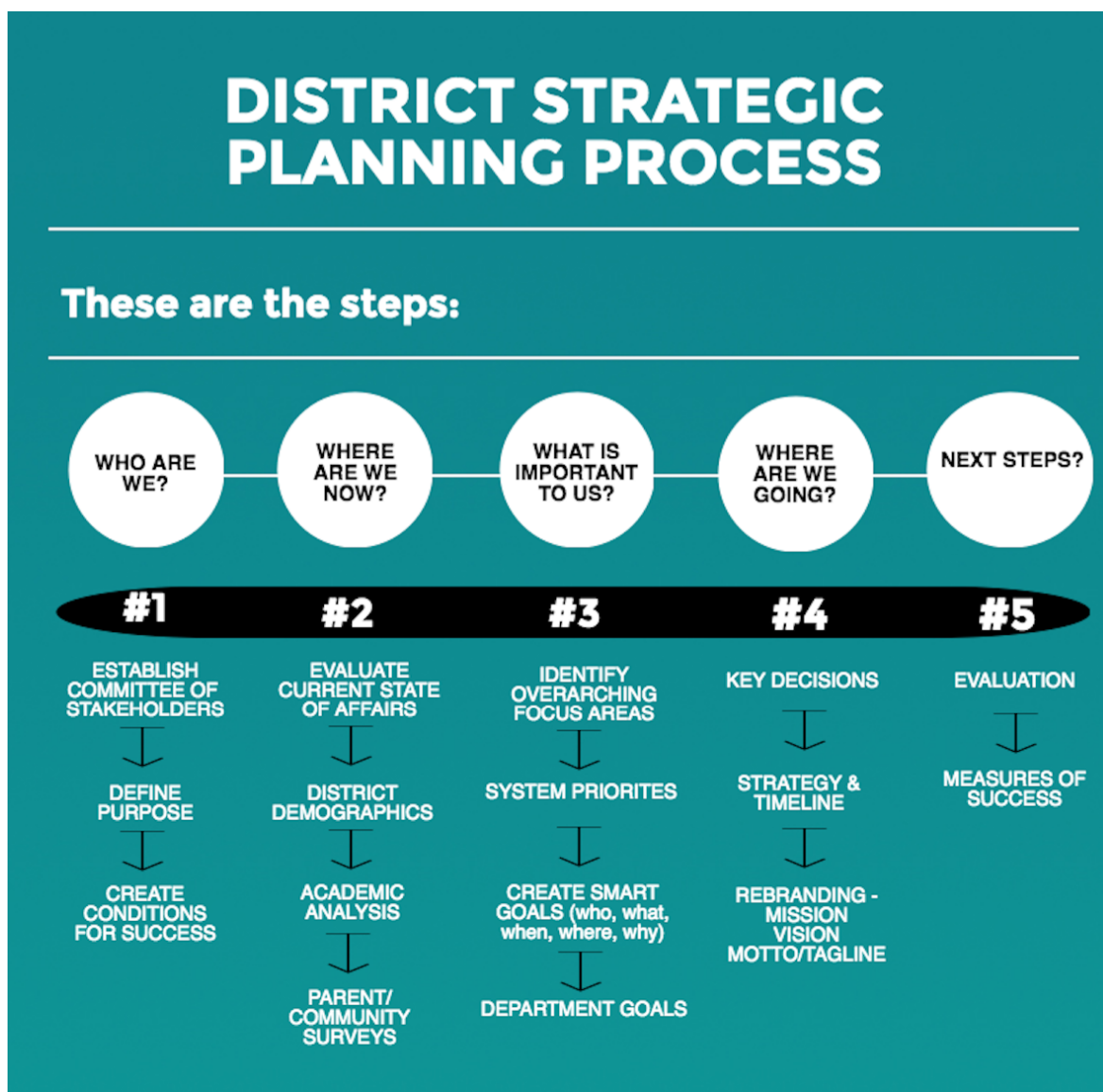


Figure 2. Strategic Planning Framework Used by Dr. Brooks.

Summary

Educational administration has long emphasized the impact of leadership on the successes or failures of our schools. Leaders have the discretion to institute change and influence district performance and student learning outcomes. With such importance placed on the superintendent's role, the event of succession can easily be seen as highly

impactful to a district. The successful transition of leadership helps to ease the process of establishing a new administration and setting forth a vision for change (Hart, 1991; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985).

Critical to success is a leader's ability to create a vision, empower members of the organization, and create meaning for the work of the organization (Bennis, 1989; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Gabarro, 1987). The implementation of a strategic planning process used as part of the beginning phase of new leadership, may provide insight for establishing new leadership and addressing district needs.

The following chapter outlines the research methods used to conduct this study with the study's overarching goal of understanding how leadership succession and transition can be impacted through the implementation of the strategic planning process. The methodology outlined in Chapter III contains eight sections: (a) rationale for research approach; (b) settings and participants; (c) recruitment; (d) data collection; (e) data analysis; (f) issues of trustworthiness; (k) benefits and risks; and (l) limitations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The primary goal of this study is to examine strategic planning as a vehicle for the succession, transition, and incorporation of superintendents. Chapter I provided an overview of the study's purpose and outlined the research questions to be explored. The literature review in Chapter II created the study's foundation through consideration of scholarly works relevant to leadership succession, transition, and strategic planning.

This chapter provides a description of the methodology used for the research and rationale for the specific steps taken to understand the problem. It is organized in eight sections: (a) rationale for research approach; (b) settings and participants; (c) recruitment; (d) data collection; (e) data analysis; (f) issues of trustworthiness; (k) benefits and risks; and (l) limitations.

Rationale for Research Approach

Qualities that new leadership brings to an organization, as described in The Oxford Handbook of Strategy (Faulkner & Campbell, 2003), include "a new vision, new strategies, new networks, new energy, and most important, new ways of doing things" (p. 797). There is always a sense of uncertainty and disruption in the flow of work when a new leader arrives. The event can prove especially difficult when one is taking over an established administration with the directive for creating change. The situation calls for new leaders to quickly access the organization and set expectations while creating

conditions that enable the organization's members to acclimate to a new leadership style. Successful leaders use this time as an opportunity to create a platform for working together as Warren Bennis (1989, p. 187) explains, "Great leaders are always engaged in a creative collaboration." To lead successfully, Bennis identifies three traits that include "vision, the ability to rally the others, and integrity" (1989, p. 23). This study has been designed to learn how strategic planning can serve as a vehicle in assisting with effective leadership transition at a school district's highest ranking position, the superintendency.

The overall design of this qualitative research project employed an interpretivist approach using semi-structured interviews to explore the following research questions:

1. What are specific challenges faced by incoming superintendents upon entry and transition into an established organization?
2. How do school superintendents/administration regard their experiences with the strategic planning process as a vehicle to introduce organizational change and expectations?
3. How did the unique characteristics of the district impact the facilitation and success of the goals set forth from the strategic plan?
4. What are specific examples of change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan? How have the changes been perceived?

These questions have opened the door for insightful discussions regarding challenges and opportunities faced by newly appointed superintendents and their administrations.

Principles of Qualitative Research

Understanding qualitative research can be very confusing when trying to decipher multiple and various approaches that have similar meanings. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described it as “...difficult to define clearly. It has not theory or paradigm that is distinctly its own” (p. 6). Lofland and Lofland (1984) coined the expression “terminological jungle” to describe the many terms used within social science, stating that “often researchers simply ‘do it’ without worrying about giving ‘it’ a name” (as cited in Ely, 1991, p. 2). Spradley’s (1980) description of qualitative research breaks it down to an ongoing pattern of questions and answers, explaining it as “the process of narrowing the focus. . . asking questions, developing in-process answers and asking questions again, and understanding that both questions and answers must be discovered in the social situation being studied” (as cited in Ely, 1991, p. 55). Ely (1991) goes on to compare this continuous cycle to a dance, which “is at the heart of qualitative research” (p. 55). With a focus on social science, qualitative research observes and tries to make sense of behaviors and interactions of others. In essence, qualitative research is about exploring questions and ideas in and about life and behavior. The answers we arrive at are often turned into additional questions in which further research can happen. Qualitative research is simultaneously dynamic and complex.

The Interpretivist Approach

The interpretivist approach attempts to understand the participants’ experiences and how they interpreted their experiences. The guide, *Qualitative Research Practice* (Ritchie, et al., 2013), explains this process as “the school of thought that stresses the

importance of interpretation, as well as observation in understanding the social world is known as interpretivism” (p. 13). Interpretive research “seeks to comprehend phenomena, not on the basis of the researcher’s perspective and categories, but from those of the participants in the situations studied” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 289).

The interpretivist approach is often compared to the phenomenology approach in that they both seek to learn about the experiences of their subjects; however, they differ in the respect that the interpretivist approach views reality as subjective, arising from the nature of knowing and how we find meaning in our world. Based on the fundamental belief that humans can’t be separated from their knowledge, the interpretivist approach assumes that the researcher’s worldviews are incorporated in all aspects of the research process (Dudovskiy, 2011).

Central to this approach is the core belief that “truth is socially agreed upon rather than discovered through special forms of research. . . it tends to shift the responsibility for generalization to the reader rather than making it the responsibility of the writer/scholar” (Willis 2008, p. 67). In other words, the interpretivist method is dynamic in that each individual has his/her own particular way of seeing truths or realities that are socially constructed and fluid.

This interpretivist perspective has guided my work by placing the focus on understanding experiences through semi-structured interviewing, dialog, and analysis of supporting materials which included district strategic planning guides as well as local media and news articles. This method has ensured rich and detailed interactions with

each district's superintendent and strategic planning committee members in order for meaning and interpretations to emerge.

Setting and Participants

Dr. Brooks has assisted four school districts with the creation of a strategic plan. While all four districts shared similar profiles of having female superintendents, three of the four districts had newly hired superintendents who implemented the strategic planning process upon arrival. I had originally intended to incorporate the third district to this study; however, the superintendent left shortly after the strategic plan was completed and my study evolved into examining the following two districts.

Setting

Two North Carolina K-12 public school districts, Central County School District (CCSD) and East City School District (ECSD), were purposively selected for this study because of their participation in the strategic planning process led by the consultant, Dr. Brooks. CCSD completed the strategic planning process in March 2014 and ECSD completed the process in September 2015. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the school districts and participants cited in this study.

District profiles. The districts not only differ in size and student membership but also in the geographic and demographic makeup of the area and communities they serve. The first district, CCSD, is comprised of 35 schools and 20,000 students. It can be characterized as midsized, centrally located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina and spanning a geographic area of approximately 150 square miles. CCSD has a very diverse demographic makeup, with high minority representation and high poverty.

The second district, ECSD, is comprised of 10 schools with 1,859 students. Located in the eastern region of North Carolina and smaller in size, spanning approximately 50 square miles. ECSD has a more homogenous demographic makeup with the majority of representation being white and affluent.

Participants

Superintendent profiles. Both newly appointed superintendents implemented the strategic planning process upon their arrival to the district. Each share the characteristics of being females who range in age from 45 – 55. Each holds a doctoral degree and is new to the role within the district they serve. They differ, however, in other areas. The Central County School District superintendent, Dr. Loretta Miller, is Caucasian and has a more extensive background of experiences. Dr. Miller has served in multiple roles within three states. Her experiences include teacher, director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. While this is her first superintendency in North Carolina, it will be her second time serving in the role of superintendent. She served six years in her first superintendent role and four years as assistant superintendent in a neighboring state.

The East City School District superintendent, Dr. Patricia Blake, is African American whose background includes teacher, director, and assistant superintendent exclusively within the state of North Carolina. She is not only new to the district, but she is also new to the role of the superintendency.

District leadership participants. In addition to the interviews with the superintendents mentioned above, I targeted district and school administrators who met the following criteria: (a) each held positions of leadership prior to the previous

successor's departure; (b) each experienced the succession and transition process; (c) and each were participants on the strategic planning committee. These individuals were made up of school board members, central support staff, and principals.

For the purpose of consistency, as well as contrast and comparison between districts, I made an effort to interview candidates that held similar leadership positions. Participants from CCSD included the school board chair and two school board members, four central support administrators, and one principal. Participants from ECSD included the school board chair and one school board member, three central support administrators, and three principals (see Table 1). Participants will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Consultant. Finally, I interviewed the consultant, Dr. Brooks. He used the same method to facilitate each district's strategic planning process. This aided in my ability to compare and contrast the two districts. Additionally, the consultant's relationship with both superintendents contributed to understanding factors relating to pre- and post-arrival as well as the transition process that followed.

Table 1. Study Participants

Participants (Pseudonym)	Position Held (Pseudonym)	School District (Pseudonym)
Robert Brooks	Consultant	N/A
Loretta Miller	Superintendent	Central County School District
Pat Tillerson	Principal	Central County School District
Elaine Devost	Director	Central County School District
Harley Haley	Director	Central County School District
Lee Davis	School Board	Central County School District
Casey Sanders	School Board	Central County School District
Kerry Perdue	School Board Chair	Central County School District
Riley Pompeo	Director	Central County School District
Tommie Sessions	Director	Central County School District
Patricia Blake	Superintendent	East City School District
Lynn Wall	Director	East City School District
Sylvia Smith	School Board Chair	East City School District
Mary Gardner	School Board	East City School District
Logan Maxwell	Director	East City School District
Michelle Harris	Director	East City School District
Sal Scott	Principal	East City School District
Drew Meyer	Principal	East City School District
Arin Duncan	Principal	East City School District

Recruitment

The process of gaining access to potential interview participants is often referred to as “working through a “gatekeeper” (Ritchie, et al., 2013, p. 90). The *gatekeepers* for this research were Dr. Brooks, Dr. Blake, Michelle Harris, and Dr. Miller. Dr. Brooks was the primary gatekeeper who provided access to Dr. Blake, the ECSD superintendent. In turn, Dr. Blake provided me access to Michelle Harris, director at ECSD who put me in touch with participants who met my criteria for the research.

As a direct report of Dr. Miller, I was able to access and gain her permission for the study as well as approval to interview participants meeting the research conditions outlined for the study.

Central County School District

I report directly to the superintendent for CCSD. Dr. Miller approved my study which allowed me the ability to set up an interview with her as well as the access needed to request interviews with other district personnel. I recruited the remainder of the participants through emails using the format outlined in my IRB. I followed up with a phone call to further explain the format for the interview and establish a time and date for the meeting.

East City School District

Dr. Brooks, arranged for my initial contact with the ECSD superintendent, Dr. Blake. Three obstacles hindered this process: 1) I had revisions to my IRB which resulted in timing delays, 2) by the time the IRB was approved, the ECSD superintendent had left the district and been appointed superintendent for another school district in North Carolina, and 3) the interim superintendent for ECSD did not feel comfortable approving my *Permission to Conduct Research* request until the new superintendent for ECSD arrived.

Regardless of the hurdles, my initial contact with Dr. Blake was productive. She was very open to participating in this research and accommodating with her busy schedule. Dr. Blake also put me in touch with an ECSD point person, Michelle Harris, who assisted with clearing the way for my research request. Ms. Harris was able to have

the research approved by the district's new superintendent and helped me arrange and schedule interviews with the other district personnel. I worked through her as the ECSD *gatekeeper* and point of contact for all interviews conducted within the district.

I recruited the remainder of the participants through emails using the format outlined in my IRB. I followed up with additional emails to further explain the format for the interview and establish a time and date for the meeting.

Data Collection

As the primary method of data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each superintendent, the consultant, and representatives from their planning committees to understand how the strategic planning process served to facilitate the superintendency transition. Using a conversational style of interviewing generated dialog that informed this study with rich perspectives, opinions, and experiences. In *Qualitative Research Practice* (Ritchie et al., 2013), Sidney and Beatrice Webb, pioneers in social research, are credited with providing a description of this interviewing method as “conversation with a purpose” (p. 178). The approach provided a flexible and fluid exchange which generated meaningful and engaging dialogue. It also enabled me to connect with the participant on a more personal level.

As the secondary method of data collection, I assimilated and reviewed multiple media reports from local area news outlets that chronicled significant, school-related events. This method confirmed timeframes for events and corroborated many of the comments and accounts mentioned in the various interviews. Finally, each district's “official” strategic plan was reviewed as an additional source of supporting data.

Interviews

Format. I held semi-structured, face-to-face interviews which typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews consisted of topic areas relating to: (a) each participant's unique background, (b) the district's unique characteristics and leadership background, (c) the pre/post arrival process, (d) the strategic planning process, and (e) perceptions of outcomes. While all interviews were conducted in a consistent manner and using the same questions, the semi-structured format allowed me the ability to adjust the order and exact wording of the questions depending on different conditions presented during the interview process. This interviewing method incorporates flexibility in order to allow responses, additional questions, and other points to be covered (Bryman, 2001; Hessler, 1992).

Process. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Confidentiality and pseudonyms were a priority and de-identification was used to prevent participant information and identities from being connected with the information.

Initial contact. Once I obtained district approval for the research, my method for contacting participants in CCSD was relatively easy. Being an employee of the district and having an historical perspective, I was able to easily identify personnel who fit my research criteria. I emailed each participant, explained my purpose and requested an interview. Each individual contacted quickly accepted my request and were very accommodating with setting interview dates and times. My experience with the CCSD interview process was uncomplicated and straightforward. I attribute this in part to my

being a CCSD employee and colleague of the participants. Trust, credibility, and understanding were established prior to my request for an interview.

My experience with the ECSD interview process was different. Once I was approved to conduct research, I worked through my ECSD contact to identify interviewees who fit my research criteria. This process was delayed due to a variety of factors that included the new superintendent's arrival, the contact going on vacation with limited communication, and the early August start of school. Working through those logistics proved challenging but not insurmountable.

Eventually, I obtained several names and contact information for potential interview candidates. I used a customized email template that was worded to ensure consistency of message for introducing myself, my purpose for reaching out, and a request for an interview. I also copied the gatekeeper to let the recipient know that my purpose was authentic and the research had been approved by the district. I also included my cell number in case they wanted to discuss the nature of my research. I saw this process as a way of establishing credibility even though I was a stranger. The resulting ECSD interviews were scheduled over a three-day period because of the travel and overnight stays involved.

In preparation for all interviews, I emailed each participant the week of the meeting to remind them of the interview and sent a calendar invitation to confirm their acceptance of the scheduled date, time, and location. In both districts, all interviews were conducted at each participant's workplace with the expectation of the ECSD board members and the consultant interviews, which took place in local coffee shops.

Informed consent. Upon commencement of the interviews, an *Informed Consent Form* was presented to the candidates. The form included the following details: (a) session information with date, time, and location; (b) details of the interview process; (c) participation expectations; (d) contact information for myself as well as my dissertation chair and the university; (e) agreement to participate; and (f) permission to voice-record the interviews. The signed forms were duplicated; one copy for my records and one copy given to the participant.

Confidentiality. Pseudonyms and de-identification methods were used to prevent participant information and identities from being connected with the data. The research data and associated digital documents are stored on an external hard drive that is password protected. The hard drive and associated paperwork comprised of notes and materials are locked in a filing cabinet in my home.

Interviewing. As a general strategy for the interviews, I began with broad, open-ended questions regarding their background and how it led to them being in the district. This introductory phase of the interview helped make participants comfortable being recorded. The guiding questions steered the interviews but did not determine the direction of the sessions because I was always aware of opportunities to take the conversation deeper to truly understand what the interviewee was saying as well as invite reflection, examples of experiences, and details. This approach helped me to avoid imposing my personal perceptions and meanings on their story. I found the interview process challenging because I was constantly balancing the desire to be engaged with the

participant's story while anticipating how to frame the next open-ended comment or question in order to bring about additional conversation.

Appendixes A and B provide a matrix of open-ended questions aligned with the study's research questions. The questions were customized by role and guided the data collection process. Appendix A outlines the set of questions used with each superintendent. Appendix B outlines the set of questions used with the school board members, district leadership, and consultant.

Transcription. After the conclusion of each interview and as part of the transcription phase, I noted observations and impressions that were not part of the recorded dialog. These observations often included: feelings and reactions from the conversation; informal observations of the interviewee; comments made by the interviewee before or after recording; and any thoughts or insights that may have occurred in relations to the questions (Josselson, 2013, p. 175).

I debated on whether to use a transcription service or transcribe my own interviews. I felt there were advantages to both. Hatch (2002) describes the process of transcribing as “difficult and tedious work” (p. 113) and estimates that one should budget four hours of transcribing for every one hour of interview. This turned out to be an accurate estimate in my experience.

While using a transcription service has the advantage of saving valuable time, I felt there were more benefits to transcribing my own interviews. Hatch (2002, p. 113) lists the advantages as being “able to add context, nonverbal information, and bracketed notations from your notes and memory as the interview is typed up”. I believed

transcribing my own data would allow me to become more intimate my data. Therefore, I made the time-consuming decision to transcribe my own recordings. I purchased Express Scribe software along with a foot pedal and headset and trained myself on proper transcription techniques.

Transcribing my own recordings proved valuable for a variety of reasons. It required me to listen to participant interviews multiple times, which ensured a match between the dialog and the transcription. The process revealed comments that I initially overlooked from the face-to-face interviews. Listening to the recordings revealed feelings, such as hesitation and uncertainty that were not picked up previously. It also highlighted subtle innuendos and alternative meanings that weren't originally recognized. While the work was tedious, I feel it allowed me to authentically capture the meaning behind the words. Once an interview had been transcribed, reviewed, and properly formatted, I emailed the interviewee a digital copy and requested they review and provide feedback. Member checks gave participants an opportunity to address questions or concerns as well as ensure accuracy. Member checking is defined as a "quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview" (Harper & Cole, 2012, p. 510). This type of process allows participants to review their statements for accuracy of interpretation as well as validate their experiences. Responding participant feedback from the member check was positive. There were no requests for changes, edits, or explanations. The methods used during this phase of research aided in my understanding

of each district's unique story, developed a sense of connectedness among participants, and added to the trustworthiness of my data.

Over 22 hours of interviews were conducted with participants over a two month window in the summer and fall of 2017. In order to gain a well-rounded perspective of historical and current events happening within each district, I reviewed the strategic planning documents, school district websites, and multiple articles posted digitally from four local news outlets covering events for Central County and East City School Districts.

Data Analysis

Saldana (2015) defines a code in qualitative inquiry as a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (p. 4). Furthermore, he explains that “a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes data and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, assertion or proposition development, theory building, and other analytic processes” (Saldana, 2015, p. 4).

Coding Process

I used the ATLAS.ti 8 data analysis software for the coding process. I began by creating an initial list of a priori codes that were derived from the conceptual framework, research questions, and my prior knowledge. Once I began coding from the pre-set list, other codes emerged from the data. As patterns and themes became clear, I was able to identify twelve broad categories from my analysis. In order to discover themes within the data, Ryan and Bernard (2003) recommended analyzing word frequency, identifying the

similarities and differences between transcripts, and manual cutting and sorting procedures. They argue that words people use with regularity give insight to understanding the meaning behind their experiences. By examining the recurrences of word and phrases used by the participants, patterns and topics within the data will arise and themes can be identified. Repeated words represent what is important in the minds of the people being interviewed. D'Andrade (1995) asserts, "perhaps the simplest and most direct indication of schematic organization in naturalistic discourse is the repetition of associative linkages" (p.294). ATLAS.ti8 provides a coding feature called *word list* that I used as a form of analysis to understand the common language among the participants. Twelve broad categories emerged from 107 codes.

In order to further explore emerging themes from another perspective, I used Microsoft Office Word and employed the *cut and paste* method of highlighting blocks of text that were similar in meaning, as well some that were contrasting with each other. By combing through each interview, using ATLAS.ti8 as a first cycle of analysis and using Microsoft Office Word as a second cycle of analysis, I was able to make cross-references in order to reach the depths needed for this qualitative study.

As a result of this process, I arrived at three broad themes that were used to answer this study's research questions. This focused coding procedure was used to identify patterns and trends within and across districts in hopes that the data would reveal how the strategic planning process can serve incoming superintendents transitioning into a new school district. A list of the a priori codes, along with categories and themes that developed can be found in Appendix C.

While the ATLAS.ti software was fairly easy to use, one of the main problems I encountered during this phase of the study was accessing my files through the university's MyCloud service. When the technology department released software updates during winter break, all my data was rerouted to another server. After three days of emails and phone calls, I was able to work with the service technicians to restore my data. This situation happened twice and led to frustration and unnecessary downtime. It also made me question the stability of the university's cloud environment.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Creswell and Miller (2000) highlight the many and confusing terms used to explain validity in qualitative inquiry that includes “authenticity, goodness, verisimilitude, adequacy, trustworthiness, plausibility, validity, validation, and credibility” (p. 124) but note the general agreement is for all qualitative inquiries to show credibility of the work. Schwandt (as cited in Creswell & Miller, 2000) defined validity “as for how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them” (p. 125). With the use of validating factors such as subjectivity and trustworthiness, the accuracy of the data can be intersected with the researcher's interpretations of the data.

The subjective nature of an interpretivist approach increases the possibility of researcher bias, which is heavily impacted by personal beliefs and values. I mitigated this by being reflexive and acknowledging my personal perspectives and biases. This approach contributed toward establishing validity for this research.

Subjectivity and Positionality

Maxwell (1992, p. 279) contends that “as observers and interpreters of the world, we are inextricably part of it: we cannot step outside our own experience to obtain some observer-independent account of what we experience”. While it is extremely difficult to erase personal bias, it is possible to recognize these subjectivities in order to more accurately interpret an account from the participant’s perspective. Recognizing that subjectivity guides all aspects of research, from the act of selecting the topic through the point of data analysis, it is important that I address the biases I bring to this study.

My perspectives culminate from 12 years of experiences as executive director for two school districts, as well as my work with school strategic planning committees. I readily acknowledge my personal biases when it comes to Dr. Brooks. He is not only a friend and mentor to both superintendents; he also serves in that capacity to me, the researcher. Our professional relationship spans twelve years and continues to this day. Prior to my selecting this topic for my dissertation research, Dr. Brooks had recruited me to help gather the data and develop the presentations for the strategic planning processes for both CCSD and ECSD. Throughout these events, I have been an employee of CCSD. These experiences have given me another window into each district’s processes that have undoubtedly influenced my perceptions.

As an employee of CCSD, I was hired one month into the superintendent’s transition into the district. As a newcomer to the district, the strategic planning committee was just being formed and I was added to the list of members. I held dual roles, one as a district representative and the other as an assistant to the consultant, which involved

creating data presentations for the meetings. These experiences afforded me an insider's perspective to the mechanisms behind the strategic planning process as well as what it meant to be a district-level administrator for a public school system. I took these perspectives into account when conducting interviews and was conscious of the fact that my prior experiences and understanding of the bureaucracies involved in organizational administration gave me inside access that others may not have had.

Through the years, these combined experiences have given me a personal belief that the dynamics between politics, leadership and central office operations are often interrelated. This recognition is very important because it has allowed me to be reflective and identify ways in which my subjectivity and positionality may inform my analysis as well as the meaning I make from the data.

To manage my subjectivity and the strong opinions I have developed around these topics, I made a conscious effort to step back from my role as district administrator/strategic planning committee member and into the role of researcher. This was accomplished by using self-reflective methods to keep my perspective in check. I avoided making premature decisions or assumptions about the study and remained open to alternative perspectives. I placed focus on describing the findings from the participants' own words and stayed centered on seeking patterns, relationships and common themes among the data rather than relying on my own preconceived opinions. I felt it was incumbent upon me to understand each participant's experiences, as they exist for them. If I did not try to understand their experiences in an objective and meaningful

manner, I would have missed the opportunity to gain an authentic perspective of their reality.

Trustworthiness

The importance of establishing trustworthiness in research is a critical component of the process. Wolcott (1994) provides clarity to a complex process with the following strategies: “(a) Talk a little; listen a lot; (b) record accurately; (c) begin writing early; (d) let readers “see” for themselves; (e) report fully; (f) be candid; (g) seek feedback; and (h) write accurately” (p. 348).

I put several structures in place to guarantee the research demonstrated my commitment toward communicating these lived experiences with authenticity. Each interview was transcribed in a way that genuinely reflected the participants’ views. The interviews were guided by an established set of questions with the flexibility for open-ended responses. The less restrictive nature of the semi-structured interviews enabled me to connect with my participants. This connection resulted in the ability to use thick, rich descriptions in my findings.

For the study, districts were selected as a consequence of their involvement in the strategic planning process and district participants were selected using criteria that included their tenure in the district as well as their status of strategic planning committee members. My involvement in each district’s strategic planning processes allowed me to establish credibility and trust prior to conducting the research. I reinforced trust by adhering to the agreed upon protocols of interviewing and maintaining a formal and professional demeanor throughout the sessions. This approach resulted in direct and open

responses to my interview questions regarding the challenges and benefits of establishing a strategic planning process to facilitate new leadership.

Benefits and Risks

School superintendents, aspiring superintendents and other leaders who are considering the transition to a new position will benefit from this study by understanding pivotal areas of focus when assuming the helm of leadership within an established administration. This information will be shared with the participants.

Another benefit may result from the process of being interviewed. The research questions and rich discussion will invite participants to reveal their insights, feelings, and provide opportunities for reflection that they may not have experienced otherwise.

The study's risks are minimal and primarily focused on the participants themselves. As an example, several participants expressed feelings of frustration with leadership while others requested that certain comments made during the interview not be included as part of the record. There were three instances where I was asked to turn off the recorder in order for the participants to share specific details and accounts that supported their perspective but wanted to remain private. I addressed any response hesitation by reiterating the agreed upon interview protocol that they were under no obligation to tell me anything they did not feel comfortable with and the interview could be stopped at any point in time. I also complied with each request to turn off the recorder so the participants could share additional stories or experiences.

Confidentiality of interview recordings and notes, use of pseudonyms and the mixture of participants across two districts helped to protect anonymity. In this respect,

building a strong sense of trustworthiness with each participant has been essential to the study and helped mitigate risks.

Limitations of the Study

When approaching the description of this study's limitations, I referred to the advice of Corrine Glesne. In her book, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* (2011), she writes, "Limitations are consistent with the partial state of knowing in social research, and elucidating your limitations helps readers know how they should read and interpret your work" (p. 214). For this research, the following limitations presented the greatest potential impact on the quality of my findings:

1. Research is constrained by positionality: I am an employee of one of the school districts researched for this study. Additionally, I was involved in the facilitation of the strategic planning process for both districts researched for this study. I understand and am aware of the roles and responsibilities that surround this position but I lack any understanding of what it is like to be a newly-hired superintendent and how they experience establishing a new administration in an unfamiliar district. I wanted to understand more about their experiences. I also wanted to learn the views and experiences of various district administrators who met the criteria of being on the strategic planning committee but were also employed in leadership positions during the succession and transition timeframe. This allowed me to gain perspectives of the succession and transition process as well as compare and contrast district administration and leadership.

2. Research is constrained by gender: The study was limited to the incoming experiences of women superintendents who had held their positions for 18 or fewer months and utilized the strategic planning process as part of the transition phase into the position. While participants included both novice and veteran incoming superintendents, it does not include experiences from male counterparts. These differences were taken into consideration when analyzing and interpreting the data.

3. Research is constrained by access and time: The study encompassed interviews with nineteen stakeholders ranging from the superintendent, school board, district administration, and principals. Establishing a face-to-face meeting with all representatives from each of these groups presented obstacles of access and time. While I felt it was extremely important to incorporate the perceptions of all stakeholders within the context of this study, I focused on securing interviews with representatives from the strategic planning committees who held positions of leadership during the past administration and into the new administration.

4. Research is constrained by location: While the study is limited to the state of North Carolina, the districts interviewed are geographically distant from each other which required travel and overnight stays. While I was successful in establishing interviews with all targeted participants, when I reached out for follow-up questions that I had for specific participants, I did not receive replies or responses. This feedback would have allowed me a fuller perspective of the succession and transition process.

Summary

The focus of this chapter was to outline the research methods that were conducted in support of this study. As stated, participants from two districts within North Carolina were selected for participation in this research. The study focused on understanding factors that support the transition of superintendents during the entry phase of succession. Specifically, the study sought to learn the experiences of superintendents and administrators who implemented a district strategic plan as a means of introducing new leadership in order to build relationships, learn the organization, establish their new administrations, and map out a vision for change. This information may prove valuable as more districts experience turnover in superintendent positions. It may also inform future research in the area of leadership succession and transition.

The following chapters examine each district's unique experiences as it relates to this dynamic of leadership change. Organized in a parallel manner and aligned with the conceptual framework, Chapter IV focuses on the experiences of Central County School District and Chapter V examines the experiences of East City School District.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This qualitative, interpretative study examined how incoming school superintendents utilized the strategic planning process during transition in a new district leadership position to establish their new administration. A review of the literature raised the following four research questions (See Appendix A and B):

1. What are specific challenges faced by incoming superintendents upon entry and transition into an established organization?
2. How do school superintendents/administration regard their experiences with the strategic planning process as a vehicle to introduce organizational change and expectations?
3. How did the unique characteristics of the district impact the facilitation and success of the goals set forth from the strategic plan?
4. What are specific examples of change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan? How have the changes been perceived?

Answers to the research questions were sought through interviews that explored personal experiences and perceptions. In the following chart, characters referred to in each district's narrative who did not serve as participants are highlighted in yellow. It also lists the participants interviewed for this study to serve as a guide for referral (See Table 2):

Table 2. District Narratives Character Listing

Character Listing (Pseudonym)	Position Held (Pseudonym)	School District (Pseudonym)
Robert Brooks	Consultant	N/A
Loretta Miller	Superintendent	Central County School District
Pat Tillerson	Principal	Central County School District
Elaine Devost	Director	Central County School District
Harley Haley	Director	Central County School District
Lee Davis	School Board	Central County School District
Casey Sanders	School Board	Central County School District
Kerry Perdue	School Board	Central County School District
Riley Pompeo	Director	Central County School District
Tommie Sessions	Director	Central County School District
Jackie Garland	Previous Superintendent	Central County School District
Patricia Blake	Superintendent	East City School District
Lynn Wall	Director	East City School District
Sylvia Smith	School Board Chair	East City School District
Mary Gardner	School Board	East City School District
Logan Maxwell	Director	East City School District
Michelle Harris	Director	East City School District
Sal Scott	Principal - Elementary	East City School District
Drew Meyer	Principal - Elementary	East City School District
Arin Duncan	Principal - Middle	East City School District
Mr. Jackson	Previous Superintendent	East City School District
Dr. Long	Interim Superintendent	East City School District
Dr. Peterson	Succeeding Superintendent	East City School District

Chapters IV and V provide an account of events and the evolution of leadership that is unique to each district based on data collected from participant interviews. The chapters are organized by presenting each district's story separately while maintaining a consistent structure so that connections can be made. The findings are organized by the main stages of the conceptual framework: (1) Pre-Arrival; (2) Successor Entry; (3) Post-Arrival Transition; (4) Strategic Planning Process; and (5) Incorporation.

Central County School District

Situated in central North Carolina, just outside of a major metropolitan area, the sprawling county is comprised of a county seat along with nine urban and rural municipalities that make up the school district zones. It is positioned along a main corridor highway and is host to some of the state's most beautiful attractions. Central County School District serves over 19,000 students and employs over 3000 staff members. It is made up of thirty-five schools, three support buildings, and is the second largest employer in the area.

This middle-class, conservative-leaning county has been less progressive than some of its neighboring communities. While bordering counties have experienced economic advancements, the area has largely lagged behind. Many have observed that years of divisive and partisan leadership by elected government officials has been one of the main reasons it has not been as competitive as others.

Corresponding with the county's economic stagnation, CCSD has experienced a significant drop in student membership over the past decade. The figure below shows the downward trend of decline over a ten-year period. (see Figure 3).

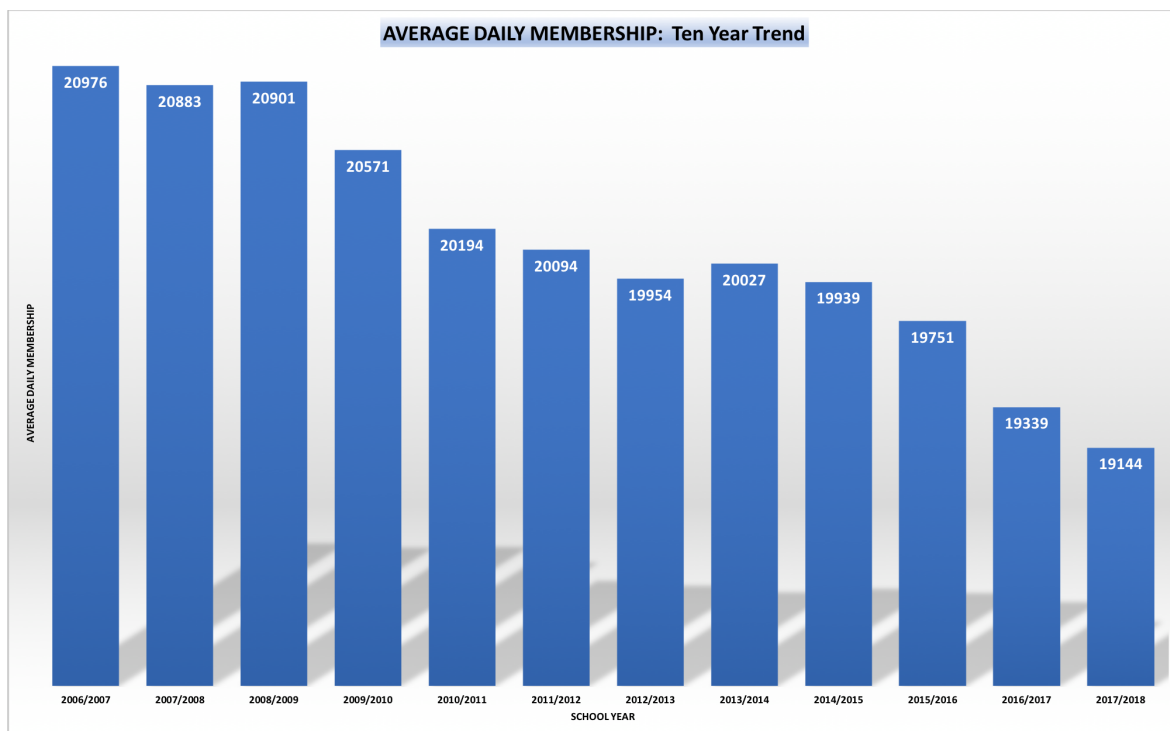


Figure 3. Central County School District Average Daily Membership

Governmental Organizations

Prior to considering how the process of strategic planning was used as a vehicle for succession, transition, and incorporation of a new superintendent, an overview of the broader narrative and challenges faced by district leadership is provided. This section examines the governmental organizations and their influence upon the school district. As Pfeiffer and Davis-Blake (1986) concluded from their research on succession and organizational performance, “the consequences of successions are likely to vary dramatically depending on the conditions surrounding them” (p. 81).

Board of Education

The school board is comprised of seven elected officials, each representing separate regions of the county. This governing body is tasked with the overarching goal of ensuring effective educational outcomes for all students while advocating for the needs of its electorate. Through the years, these two missions have come into conflict by members placing focus on the desires of their constituents rather than the district as a whole. As a new board member, Kerry Perdue shared his feelings regarding the way board members are elected by their district areas and how it impacts decision-making by the board members, stating:

You realize very quickly is that, unfortunately with the school board; each seat is broken up by area of the county. Which I don't think is a good thing because people go into it with the intention of having an impact or doing something official for their area. But, everything you do is about the county.

City Council and County Commissioners

In contrast to the school board elections, both the city and county commissioners are elected at-large and have a long record of working against each other. While each has considerable influence over the school system, CCSD is largely dependent upon the local funding appropriations from the county board of commissioners who have historically held tight purse strings on the availability of money allocated to the district, and in some cases, taken back previously distributed funds.

The city council and county commissioners have a long record of working against each other. Over time, this unhealthy dynamic has hurt the community and created a sense of distrust. Consolidation forced these communities together years ago. While

many years have passed, loyalties and politics are interwoven in most of the decision-making processes. These dynamics have often impeded working relationships.

District Merger and Fight for A Central Office

Central County School District was formed after an arduous, six-year planning process. In spite of the many setbacks, a plan for the merger was finally approved in 1987 and put into effect July 1, 1989. Dr. Dean Marteen was hired as the new superintendent to lead the consolidated district. Even though the city and county school systems had been merged to create CCSD, the district continued to be managed from multiple locations across the county. Shortly after being hired and as part of the merger agreement, Dr. Marteen initiated talks regarding another type of consolidation -- that of the district's five separate offices that housed various support services, beginning one of the longest fights the county had ever experienced.

The move towards a central office took years of disagreements, petty politics, and five superintendents to finally be realized. Each succeeding superintendent inherited the expectation of central office negotiations. With every step forward, there were multiple steps back. These dynamics constantly roiled in the background, creating dysfunction and animosity that proved counter-productive to the teaching and learning process.

Pre-Arrival

Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) framed their model for succession around school settings and considered key variables associated with educational processes that occur during the prearrival, arrival, and succession stages of educational leadership. Their framework identified important prearrival stage factors that include: reasons for

succession; selection process; reputations of leaders; and orientation of leaders.

According to Hart (1993) “traits, behaviors context, and interactions play important parts” (p. 58). The following prearrival factors are aligned in accordance with the conceptual framework’s prearrival stage. They include: predecessor administration; predecessor departure; organizational health; hiring process; and insider / outsider status. Recognizing the interconnected dynamics of events that happen during succession provides an understanding of leadership, change, and culture of the district across time.

Predecessor Administration

From his study of a small manufacturing company Salaman (1977) researched leadership’s lasting impact on an organization’s culture and relationships. He observed that “even after the person responsible has left an organization the consequences of his leadership remain and serve to produce manager-subordinate relationships and personal attitudes similar to those he encouraged and personified” (Salaman, 1977, p. 373). As demonstrated with Central County School District, the dynamics behind a predecessor’s administration has the potential to heavily influence the next leadership’s administration.

Dr. Jackie Garland was hired as the Central County School District’s superintendent in 2006 and served seven years before retiring in September 2013. A native of the area, she began her teaching career in CCSD and returned years later to assume the superintendent’s role previously held by Dr. Moby, the departing superintendent.

Insider status. An inside successor is defined as a person who is hired from within the organization. Birnbaum (1971) suggests that hiring an insider, under certain

conditions, may be a better choice than an outsider, especially during periods of high “intra-organizational conflict” (as cited in Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985, p. 90). Dr. Garland was an insider who had risen through the ranks and had a long-standing network of relationships with the community and district stakeholders. As a native to the county, Tommie Sessions grew up and raised her children in the community. She also served in district support roles throughout her career in the school district, eventually moving into the executive administrative assistant to both Dr. Moby and Dr. Garland. She had transitioned to another position prior to Dr. Miller’s arrival. Sessions felt Garland was selected to oversee the district because she was a intimately familiar with the school system as well as a product of the community and was perceived as having a very good rapport with the members.

Being an insider had many advantages but it also had drawbacks. Hart (1993) points to the potential for dysfunction from hiring within, citing “high internal rivalry raises particular obstacles against the success of an insider” (p. 71). This proved to be the case in Garland’s situation when she was faced with making unpopular decisions that impacted people in the organization with whom she had personal relationships. She avoided making people angry and uncomfortable with confrontation. Lee Davis had been a school board member prior to Dr. Garland’s arrival and throughout her tenure as superintendent. He explained:

Jackie is a nice, sweet person but because of her local ties sometimes she couldn’t -- well, she couldn’t or wouldn’t make the hard decisions because she maybe didn’t want make this or that group angry. So non-action is kind of action.

Leadership dysfunction. An organization's climate and culture defines the ways in which the organization operates. *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Climate and Culture* (2014) links organizational effectiveness to climate and culture stating, "Everything that happens in organizations is due to climate and culture and everything that happens affects climate and culture" (Schneider & Barbera, 2014, p. 672). In their summary and conclusion of the *Handbook*, Schneider and Barbera describe this central theme of their book:

Climate and culture are inextricably connected, mutually reinforcing, and also reciprocally related. Culture (values, basic assumptions, beliefs) causes climates to emerge through the policies, practices, and procedures that define climate, which in turn are the bases for cultural values, beliefs, and basic assumptions. (2014, p. 673)

The climate and culture that Dr. Garland inherited were tumultuous. The district's long history of angry politics was undermining effectiveness. While district operations were in disarray, the district's board leadership was described as broken. Kerry Perdue shared his perspective as to why board leadership was so unpopular. He said:

We had a superintendent, board members, and central office staff that had been here a long time. I think people felt like it was the same thing over and over and there was just no change - plus there was a huge fight at the time between the county commission and the school board. There was just a lot of contention.

Accountability was lacking and the district operated without a solid system of checks and balances. Even though it had been ten years since the district merger, the two systems had never really come together as one unit. Dr. Garland referred to CCSD as a system of schools rather than a school system.

Garland's leadership. Dr. Garland was thought of as a curriculum leader, first and foremost. She loved children, valued relationships, and had a passion for curriculum and instruction. Riley Pompeo, a central office director who had been recruited by Garland, offered her perspective:

Jackie inherited an administration where there were no controls. Principals ran their schools, policies weren't enforced, and no one ever saw the superintendent. She worked really hard to change that by being approachable and present at every principal, curriculum, or grade-level meeting.

Many in the community and district remain firm in their friendship and support of Garland but she also had her critics. Several interviewees framed her leadership as cliquish, explaining that Garland surrounded herself with allies who she recruited and placed in key administrative roles. She was described as reserved. She avoided interpersonal conflicts and sidestepped the spotlight, such as speaking engagements. She navigated difficult situations by empowering trusted members on her administrative team to make the tough calls. Current and former board members attributed her reluctance to face difficult situations as the reason why many decisions were postponed, problems worsened, and serious personnel issues were ignored. as Lee Davis continued:

As good as Jackie was about instruction, she was afraid to address tough situations. She hated controversy at all cost and didn't want to address it. My perception was that we had 35 little fiefdoms operating

Predecessor Departure

Multiple scholars have written about the variables associated for changes in leadership. Grusky (1960) discussed cited two factors; environmentally and

organizationally controlled reasons for succession. Allen, Panian, and Lotz (1979) examined poor performance as a contributing factor of succession. Gephart (1978) focused on status degradation as a type of involuntary succession in which a leader is removed from office. Gephart differentiates types of succession that lead to departure by the predecessor stating, "Succession can be caused by a predecessor's 1) death, 2) retirement, 3) forced removal (demotion, firing), 4) voluntary resignation, or 5) promotion, transfer, or advancement. Each type of succession has its unique aspects, meanings, activities, and effects" (1978, p. 559). In this situation, CCSD's change in leadership happened as a result of Garland's decision to retire.

Garland's resignation and central office lawsuit. Dr. Garland notified the board in December that she would be retiring the following August. Garland's decision to retire coincided with the board's decision to file a lawsuit against the county commissioners in the fight for a new central office. The school board found itself in a precarious situation. It was a set of events that involved: a legal battle; a superintendent search; and the responsibility of maintaining district operations in the presence of a lame duck administration.

Dr. Garland had fought the fight for a central office building since the first day of her administration. Through the years, she had worked hard at negotiations to create conditions in which agreement would be achieved and a central office could finally be built but it never came together. The dynamics negatively impacted her ability to lead and ultimately played into her decision to retire.

Organizational Health

Keyton (2014) describes organizations as “sites of hierarchy, dominance, and power” in which members of the organization have varying degrees of “power and status, as well as varying degrees of control over message creation and message meaning” (as cited in Schneider & Barbera, 2014, p. 127). Studies of organizational health, viewed through the lens of power and authority, indicate that standard practices are established when powerful members of an organization get less powerful members to accept their views and values of work. In many cases, these views are not beneficial to the less powerful and negatively affect employee work life. CCSD was an example of this dynamic.

Garland developed a close inner circle of selected leaders to whom she delegated authority. She gave them the autonomy to run their departments and schools as they saw fit. Over time, the organization’s culture became one operated on power and control. In multiple instances, CCSD’s workplace culture was referred to as a good ole’ boys club. It was a system where friends and families came first and connections and concessions reigned supreme. The term *good ole boy’s club* was a common thread that ran through the interviews and used to refer to an inner circle of people who were recognized as the decision-makers and able to advance in their career status. Lee Davis summarized the leadership dynamics during Garland’s administration, saying:

I don't think Jackie had a clue about how badly run the departments were. She was trusting - which you should be able to trust the people you hire but, in this case, some were not people who should have been in their positions.

As a well-respected principal who had been in the district for many years, Pat Tillerson had risen through the ranks of CCSO. He shared his perspective of the district dynamics and credited much of the dysfunction to the lack of a central office, saying:

Nothing worked together, there was no cohesion within the groups. I would often blame that on the fact that we didn't have a central office because people worked in different buildings and different areas of the city. I think that led to confusion and lack of collaboration within departments.

Hiring Process

Prior events within a district can impact the board's hiring decisions, as it did with the superintendent search for Garland's replacement. According to Van Deuren, Evert & Lang (2016), contributing factors that influence the board's decision-making process include, "the dynamic relationship between the board and the departing superintendent, the formal and informal assessment of the outgoing superintendent's job performance, the morale of the staff, the impressions of the community, and the overall state of affairs" (p. 122).

Kerry Perdue had just been elected to the board when Garland submitted her notice of retirement. He was new to the dynamics and discussed the undercurrents that played out during his first several months on the board, saying:

That was a tumultuous year with the fight between the school board and county commissioner for the central office building. The biggest issue was (without a doubt) the new central office building. That was right before Dr. Garland left. She had been here for a while and the system had been pretty stagnant. I think that had come to a head and there was some definite contention between the school system and community. The building was a big thing and, quite frankly, that was really, probably 90% of what people talked about during that election race.

Superintendent search and interview process. The school board contracted with the North Carolina School Board Association to conduct a closed superintendent search. They scheduled public focus groups and began gathering input from community members regarding what they were looking for in a superintendent. Following a screening process and initial interviews, two outside finalists were narrowed down from a larger pool of applicants. The board's criteria included someone who was experienced and well-spoken, possessed a doctoral degree, and would be willing to relocate to the area. Other criteria included having the wherewithal to navigate through mediation with the county commissioners for the building of a new central office.

Reflecting on these past events, the board members who participated in this study each discussed a sense of relief in how things worked out. There was a general consensus that the district needed new leadership in order to move forward.

Board expectations. The school board was looking for a seasoned superintendent. Someone with experience who possessed the ability to manage conflict and address challenges head-on. They were also searching for a person who would relocate to the area and become integrated within the community. Perdue talked about these expectations, saying:

We wanted somebody with experience, even if it was an assistant superintendent, who was going to be committed to the community and not leave after a couple of years. We wanted somebody with a track record who understood how to manage these dynamics and volatility and what they were about to get into.

The other board members concurred, emphasizing the need for a strong individual who had the ability to address issues and outline a clear district direction with literacy as a

major component. The desires of the school board members set the stage for Dr. Miller to introduce a strategic planning process upon arrival and transition in to her role.

Final interviews. The culminating, second-level interviews resulted in three finalists. For the board, the final interviews were a bit more direct with question and answer sessions. Each candidate was asked to give their perspective on a variety of topics involving district needs and suggestions for future direction. It was the board's intent to be as frank as possible with each of the candidates. They were not only looking for the best fit for the district, they wanted to be transparent with each of the candidates regarding the district if they were offered the position. Perdue explained:

We wanted to be very transparent to make sure the candidates understood the volatile situation they were interviewing for. The school board and county commissioners were in a lot of disagreement. Staff morale was really low with our staff and I don't think many people would say the system was a fun place to work. To come in as a new superintendent is always tough, but to deal with that on top of what we had...it was crazy.

Superintendent selection. Ultimately, Dr. Loretta Miller was selected to be the new superintendent of Central County School District. Davis described how Miller possessed the credentials necessary to work through the difficult circumstances of the time, saying:

We were very upfront and wanted a superintendent who would build relationships with other county entities, particularly the County Commission. We also wanted someone who would stand up and say, "Hey this is right for the kids and the system." I think that's where Dr. Miller stood out among all the rest.

Casey Sanders was another newly elected board member at the time. She had recently retired from her teaching career in CCSD. Sanders had always been involved in

promoting positive change for the district which is what prompted her to run for a seat on the Board of Education. She had just been elected when Dr. Garland announced her retirement. As a member of the interview committee, Sanders recalled the defining moment when she knew that Dr. Miller was her top candidate, stating:

I was sold when Dr. Miller said, "Well, I've gone back and looked at your reading scores and don't know why you are getting all these accolades for technology when the reading scores are so low." When she said that, I thought this lady just went to the top of my list.

Dr. Loretta Miller's assessment of the interviews. From Dr. Miller's perspective, the interview process was an opportunity to not only see if she was a match for the district, but if the district was a match for her. She described feeling a shared perspective with the board members regarding what she could offer and what they were looking for in a superintendent. Following the final interview and contract negotiations, Dr. Miller began transitioning into her new role and becoming acclimated to the district and community.

Insider / Outsider Status

In his work on insiders and outsiders relating to the appointment of superintendents, Carlson (1972) delineated the differences between the two traits stating, "Insiders and outsiders differ in the importance they assign to career and place. Both have made sacrifices to obtain the superintendent's credential . . . The insider is place-bound. The outsider puts career above place. . . The outsider is career-bound" (p. 211). Hart (1993) expounded on Carlson's work, stating:

He found that insiders and outsiders have an equal likelihood of appointment when a board of education is satisfied with the district. However, insiders tend to be adapters rather than innovators and may lack a clear mandate from their superiors. Their leeway is often hampered by the previous administration. Outsider appointments are more likely when a board is dissatisfied with the direction of the district. Outsiders are innovators; feel the board expects change, and benefit from strong board commitment. (p. 70)

The school board's appointment of Dr. Miller to CCSD was due in part to their desire for change and realignment of district structures. By definition, Dr. Miller was an outsider.

Dr. Miller felt she had an advantage by being an outsider. By not having alliances or preconceived biases, she was in a better position to effect change. As a seasoned leader, she had experienced being an outsider in past situations and shared her perspective of what happens when new leaders comes into an established organization from the outside. Miller explained:

Two different things happen that I think are interesting...when a new leader comes in, it gives them an opportunity to give fresh eyes on everything. You see things objectively. The longer you are somewhere, the less likely you are to change the district because you own it. So, having a new leader look at it differently might take it to the next level...it might take it backwards or it might take it forwards. It won't stay the same, that's for sure.

While there were times when being an outsider proved uncomfortable, Dr. Miller preferred the status because she felt it better served her purpose of bringing change to the district.

The pre-arrival stage is an element of succession that starts with the departure of leadership within an organization. Once a replacement is formally hired, the post-arrival transition stages of succession take place during which the incoming leader becomes oriented to their new role. Unlike Dr. Garland who held an insider role when hired as

superintendent, Dr. Miller's outsider status required her to build relationships, learn the district, and establish organizational expectations before she could address change processes. Dr. Miller began the strategic planning process as part of her transition and incorporation into the organization.

Successor Entry

Grusky (1961) defined the concept of leadership succession stating, "Administrator succession is the process of replacing key officials in organizations" (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985, p. 88). Salaman's (1977) succession study focused on the influences a predecessor has on the incoming successor. He specifically looked at how a retired manager impacted the success of the newly hired replacement in a small manufacturing business. Similar to Salaman's case study, CCSD experienced the dynamic of a predecessor exerting strong influence over the successor's entry and transition.

Shortly after being named superintendent, Dr. Miller bought a home in the county and started integrating her family into the community. She found a church, began attending local events, and accepted positions on various boards and charitable organizations. During these instances, she would often run into her predecessor, Dr. Garland.

Dr. Garland's unique connection to the community often proved awkward since she continued to maintain active participation with the same civic organizations, boards, and community groups that Dr. Miller was now attending. Miller described these

instances as uncomfortable at first but eventually she broke the ice by inviting Garland to lunch which enabled them to establish a friendly relationship.

Dr. Garland influenced the succession in other ways as well. Prior to retirement, she filled two critical positions. Harley Haley was named Executive Director of Personnel and Elaine Devost was named Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. Shortly after the appointments of Haley and Devost, Dr. Garland's absences became more frequent, to the point that she was rarely present. According to multiple accounts, the district did not appoint an interim in Dr. Garland's absence; key members of the cabinet ran district operations and decision-making processes. Haley characterized this as a confusing time in which she operated without clear direction and leadership. She and Devost worked together closely to and took ownership of district leadership decision-making until the new superintendent was hired.

During this time, there were also people in the organization who saw the lack of leadership as an opportunity to curry favor and seek advantages. This proved taxing on the remaining cabinet members who were trying to keep the district on path. Tillerson offered a very intuitive perspective regarding leadership transition and spoke about two dynamics that happened between Garland's departure and Miller's arrival. He explained that these dynamics included board members defining expectations for the incoming administration and staff members who were posturing for positions:

There are two things that happen during the time when a new superintendent is about to get hired. First, the board members are going to put things in place that they expect to happen immediately upon the hire. I think when someone new comes in, the school board is very quick to lay out their agenda. Do they want administrators moved or removed? If there was a pot simmering, they would

expect these things to be handled by the new person coming..."Now that I'm hiring you, I expect you to do these things" so it's almost like an unwritten expectation. Second, you have people in that transitional time that are going to try to get things done in the exit process. I think one of the biggest things is that people were advocating for their own job.

Superintendent introduction. Dr. Miller arrived at CCSD with the idea of implementing a strategic planning process. The following sections provide context for understanding the influences that shaped the strategic planning process and outcomes.

Dr. Miller was welcomed into the district with a reception attended by members of the school board and other high profile stakeholders. The reception began with a press conference in which she talked about her focus for the first six months of her administration. She invited participants to join her in developing a new strategic plan for the district, explaining that her objective for the first six months would be to learn about and become part of the community by building relationships, identifying ways to address problems that have hindered past initiatives, and setting a clear vision for the future.

Her introduction was met with applause and questions, one of which involved relationship building. When the county commissioner chair asked how she would improve working relationships between the two boards, she responded by reflecting on the relationships she built with the city manager in her previous district, saying that she had a long history of building relationships and bridges. Miller reassured the crowd that she was looking forward to establishing positive working relationships that would be in the best interests of the community, pointing to her dissertation research on ways in which county, city council, and school boards work together for the individuals they

serve. More questions followed, thus beginning what she would describe as two of the most difficult and rewarding years of her professional career. She explained:

I think it would have been really difficult for anyone to come into this community as a first-time superintendent because you need a level of confidence. During that first year or two, there were times I thought I'd quit. It was just so hard. I thought, I don't know if anybody can do this but having been a superintendent for 8 years, pretty successfully, I knew I could. I knew it wasn't about me, it was more about how I pulled and held the community together.

Establishing Relationships

Amado (2016) explained how a new leader's perceptions and relationships are influenced by the opinions of others in the organization, stating "What is passed on to the new leader about the organization and its people by his or her boss inevitably tends to color the leader's perception and influence his or her approach, at least in the early stages of transition" (p. 100). The board had made Dr. Miller aware of the circumstances she had been hired into. She was also informed of some of the more challenging personalities on her administrative staff that arose from conversations with key personnel who provided background details and historical perspective. Dr. Miller commented on this dynamic, by citing Collins (2001) famous book, *Good to Great*. Using the bus analogy, she said:

Creating a team was a number one priority. I knew there were individuals in the organization who were not on board with the direction I was heading. I knew I had to get the right people on the bus and the wrong ones off.

While Dr. Miller was proactive in identifying and removing individuals of the organization who were resistant to her leadership, she was also characterized as being

very charismatic. This characteristic aided her in establishing relationships and getting to know educational stakeholders, staff, and administrative team members. She considered relationship-building a top priority and facilitated the process by scheduling one-on-one conversations, as well as off-site meetings and activities, that encouraged fellowship and provided opportunities for creating connections.

Participants used several adjectives to describe Miller's relationship-building ability. They used words such as personable and persuasive. Sanders characterized Miller's interpersonal style as charismatic, stating:

She definitely has the charisma. When you are with her, one-on-one, she has the ability to connect with you. That allowed her to immediately began making connections and building relationships.

Max Weber introduced the concept of charismatic leadership and identified three behavioral dimensions of the characteristic that include: "vision or mission; extraordinary or exceptional qualities; and recognition" (Avolio and Yammarino, 2002, p. 168). He viewed vision or mission as the most essential factor in the concept of charisma. Avolio and Yammarino (2002) contend that charismatic leadership and visionary leadership are connected by a sense of strategic vision, defining "vision-related behaviors in terms of behaviors that are related to formulating and articulating a future goal" (p. 169). Transformational leadership correlates to charismatic, inspirational, and visionary leadership behaviors. Bass and Riggio (2006) refer to the interdependence of the components contending that "transformational leadership is clearly multidimensional" (2006, p. 24).

Dr. Miller arrived at CCSD with a vision of transforming the processes of teaching and learning for the district. To make this a reality, she began by learning about the organization and assessing district processes.

Acquiring Perspective

Gabarro (1987) describes the transition time as an initial stage that happens during the first three to six months of leadership in which the new leader takes hold of their office. He explains it as a period in which the new leader works to understand the “nature of their new situations, understand what tasks and problems need to be dealt with, and assess their organization’s capabilities” (p. 20). In order to learn as much as possible about the organization, Miller used multiple strategies to establish her administration and understand district culture. Her approaches included symbolic gestures as well as strategic conversations with district and community stakeholders.

Dr. Miller had come into an organization in which departments and leadership structures were compartmentalized, sprawling, and bureaucratic. There were federal and state compliance issues; corrupt business practices; antiquated processes; community disagreement around building a new central office; and unusually low morale. The atmosphere was described as 35 siloed systems in which members of the organization operated independently and without consistency of direction or procedures. Elaine Devost talked about the toxic nature of the organization but attributed Dr. Miller’s ability to make connections and build relationships as a welcomed hope for change, saying:

Dr. Miller began building relationships with the community but approached it with a sense of awareness. She was very visible and very honest of the situation in

order to create a sense of awareness. I think people were ready and excited for that change. She came in and gave a sense of a new direction and hope.

Putting the district back on track would prove to be a monumental task, requiring drastic change. While Dr. Miller approached it as both a challenge and opportunity, she was also very worried. She described her feelings, saying:

When I took on the job, I had no idea how hard it was going to be. I would not have done it had I known how hard it was going to be. But, once you move and you buy a home and your reputation is on the line...that whole first year, I'd go home to my husband and say, "Where are we? I don't know if I can do this."

As steep as the task was, Miller sensed a great hope from the community that she would be the person to rescue them from decline, saying:

They were really committed and that was at all levels. As polarized as the community was, the one thing they all agreed on was that they wanted to perform better and they wanted more bragging rights. They felt like they were at the bottom and they were committed to trying to make that. So, they've given me, there was a lot of hope. Just a lot of hope.

In spite of being hesitant of the situation, Miller drew from her previous years as superintendent to address the challenges of her new position.

Learning established norms. To gain an understanding of the norms and expectations of behaviors that had become part of the district's cultural fabric, Dr. Miller held individual meetings with principals and department leaders. During these sessions, she was very forthright in her vision for change. While existing employees who showed a willingness to try something different were embraced, there were others who indicated a reluctance to move in a different direction. Those individuals typically found themselves

at a professional crossroads and consequentially, there were many administrative departures. The stakes were high and she needed a team that could rise to the challenge. Miller provided an example of a difficult conversation she had with one of the directors with ideas contrary to her educational beliefs. She explained:

Paul Maldin was a great example. Me feeling like that was the wrong direction or the wrong way of thinking made it a whole lot easier to say, "You got to go." I mean, I didn't know his family, I hadn't worked with him for 15 years, it was like, "That's not going to take us in the right direction." So, being new helped move things because I didn't come in with biases.

Miller felt that being new to the district made these types of difficult conversations easier because she had not formed alliances and biases with district personnel. She also anticipated there would be pockets of attrition but saw employee departures as a positive aspect of leadership change in the sense that it would allow her to move the district forward by assembling a more progressive team. Harley Haley, personnel director, also discussed the high turnover that happened upon Miller's arrival; noting that the attrition was seen as both positive and negative. Additionally, Riley Pompeo observed that over the past decade, high turnover rates had become a trend for CCSD. She noted that only three principals remained in the district's 35 schools since 2006.

Post-Arrival Transition

During the transition process, the successor moves from the newness of arrival phase of transition into the post-arrival phase. Both Gabarro (2018) and Hart (1993) assert this as a time of learning. While Gabarro refers to it as an immersion stage, Hart sees it as a time of reflection, stating "time of concrete experience and active

experimentation involving reflection leads to more abstract conceptualization of the nature of the organization” (1993, p. 59). It is during this stage that the successor has the opportunity to reflect upon and learn from the entry phase, allowing them the ability to gauge core organizational norms and behaviors.

Establishing New Expectations

According to Ortiz and Kalbus, (1998) factors associated with post-arrival involve the expansion of networked acquaintances; increased actions and reactions; and identification and development of support, dominance, and influence. As Dr. Miller became integrated within the organization, she worked to establish expectations and assemble her team. It was also during this phase that the strategic planning process became more formalized.

Assembling a team. Miller was empowered to create conditions for change by the board’s acknowledgment of the significant challenges facing her. The board’s support in conjunction with multiple administrative departures created the opening for Dr. Miller to build her own leadership team. She credited this unique opportunity as one of the reasons she was able to institute change immediately upon arrival, saying:

I believe there were a couple of things that happened that really accelerated or made change manageable. One of them was that I got the opportunity or created the opportunity to hire my own leadership team. I purposefully tried to hire people with a mindset of eagerness or whatever. So that helped, it was a big thing. You really, truly don't do things alone. We were all, kind of, new together so that made a big difference. It was significant.

Dr. Miller understood the importance of having clear norms and expectations, and she used them to give her leadership team a sense of identity, establish a common

language and guide the work. This new direction influenced the ways team members communicated with each other and helped in achieving targeted goals. Dr. Miller felt the first few weeks were critical to ensuring everyone was motivated on moving in the same direction. She used this post-arrival phase of her transition to outline her priorities and show transparency in her decision-making processes. She felt it was important for everyone to be on the same page, especially with the important work they had ahead of them.

Symbolic changes. Wanting to avoid comparisons with the previous leadership and establish a fresh beginning, Miller gave the main office an updated look. She painted the walls and added new seating. She also removed the many accolades, awards, and national recognitions that lined the walls, feeling they were incongruent with the reality of the district's scores. While some people endorsed the rationale of a clean start, others were critical and saw it as a way to minimize past successes. Miller viewed it as a way to leave the past behind and look to the future. While they can remember and draw on their experiences and past successes, they certainly would not dwell on them. As Haley commented, this was a signal to her administration that expectations were high and complacency was unacceptable.

The symbolism of moving forward was something everyone understood. This was a good way of drawing more attention to the fact that it was a new day and a fresh start to the future.

Strategic Plan Introduction

As a preemptive way to introduce the strategic planning process while learning the intricacies of the district, Miller arranged conversations with students, parents, community, and school members. She explained how she started conversations by having open discussions that were transparent and mutually beneficial. For school and community stakeholders, these activities revealed a more human and accessible perception of the incoming superintendent. For Dr. Miller, the activities served as a key, defining feature of transition that gave her a forum for introductions, bridge-building, and a means for communicating expectations.

Strategic Planning Process

Prior Strategic Plan

While the district had a formalized strategic plan in place, many of the participants indicated that it wasn't used to drive decision-making. As board member, Lee Davis recalled:

We talked about a strategic plan and we had a vision up on the wall but no one could answer questions such as; "How does what we're proposing support this vision?". Every school was doing something different and nothing was consistent. We had about ten different reading programs for twenty elementary schools.

This was the sentiment from all levels of the organization. Tillerson did not remember a strategic plan or anything being aligned with initiatives. Instead, he explained how each year would be marked by a new theme, saying:

I think every year started with a theme. We jumped on bandwagons like Larry Bell for a year or *Worksheets Don't Grow Dendrites*. The direction of the district

and how we started each school year came down to whoever was the best salesman. So, there really wasn't a strategic plan. There was never a curricular focus. It was just kind of a "do your thing" attitude. I think there wasn't really any direction prior to Dr. Miller coming.

Process for A New Strategic Plan

Dr. Miller wanted a strategic plan that would be used to drive district decisions and the post-arrival transition phase presented an opportune moment to kick off a new strategic planning process that would take them through the next six months of her new administration. She contracted with a consultant, Dr. Brooks, to facilitate the initiative. Drs. Brooks and Miller had established a trusting relationship that spanned over two decades and have worked together off and on through the years and in different capacities.

Miller knew she wanted to begin a strategic planning process as soon as she accepted the position with CCSD. She had already formulated an idea of where she wanted to drive the district but knew she needed to be a passenger of the journey. She also knew that she needed someone who she could trust to be the facilitator but not dominate the process. It was her desire that the facilitator be someone who would allow the committee to wrestle through tough conversations and let them evolve naturally. Miller was the first to reach out to Dr. Brooks and request that he lead the process. She explained that she needed a person to facilitate the process that she trusted not to interrupt the organic nature of the conversations that would take place, saying:

When I first got to CCSD, he was in a consulting role. So, I said to him that I need somebody I can trust. That I trust-trust. I wanted him to come in and listen and facilitate this process. I knew what I wanted, I knew where I wanted to head.

But with him doing it from an objective standpoint, I could sit back and listen to the conversation. He just facilitated that process for me. He literally would say, "Is this where you wanted this to go? Is this the way that you're seeing this data collection coming together?"

Dr. Brooks outlined the beginning steps of the process, which included gathering survey, demographic, and student achievement data. Once the data had been gathered, the district invited key stakeholders from a cross section of the educational community that included district administrators, board members, parents, teachers, and students. The process centered around five central questions that required participants to reflect on past events and envision future goals. The process led to the development of vision, direction, and purpose; key areas of focus; and expected outcomes. These factors coincided with the final succession stage of incorporation.

As Miller went about charting a new course for the district, she attributed many of her early successes and bridge-building opportunities to strategic planning. There were many perceived benefits to using a strategic planning process to facilitate her leadership transition. In trying to communicate and get buy-in from community members, the process not only served as an opportunity to have conversations about what's important and valued but it was used as a tool for decision-making and driver for district change. Dr. Miller felt the process was instrumental in providing clarity of purpose as well as a starting point for instituting change in the district.

The new direction was fully embraced by the community. Dr. Miller attributes the acceptance to their hunger for improvement and desire for change. School board member Lee Davis, also praised the process and resulting outcomes. As a life-long member of the

community, he has been an integral part of the community. He felt the process was organized in such a way that it each meeting built on meaningful conversations that helped the district prioritize critical goals. He said:

I've been on the board a long time and been in this community longer and I've never seen our district come together the way it did during this process. My hat is off to Dr. Miller for the way it was organized. The right people were at the table and we were able to cut through some of the old resentment and hostilities that have been haunting us for years. It created productive conversations and I believe we were successful in identifying the right priorities that we need to focus on.

The process allowed people to develop a sense of awareness while being very focused on targeted outcomes toward supporting an instructional shift for the district. Literacy served as the focal point of the plan and embedded in all department goals.

Final Product

The final product consisted of a new vision statement, motto, logo, focus areas and goals.

Vision Defined

The plan's vision, *Where Every Day, Everyone Discovers and Achieves the Extraordinary*, underscores the district's purpose of providing an extraordinary education for all children at CCSD. Dr. Miller's overarching vision is to build an organization that supports all children and create conditions for their success. She explained how she wanted to build a school district where the children thrive and credited the strategic plan for allowing her to fine-tune district priorities in order to achieve that goal.

Motto and Logo

The motto and logo were developed as a convenient way to represent the district's new branding. The words and graphics are interwoven in order to create a memorable catchphrase that can easily be identified and recited by district stakeholders. Devost discussed the impact of having a new vision, mission, and motto saying that it drives every decision made in the district. She also credited for providing focus around the vision of creating engaging opportunities for learning.

Strategic Plan Focus Areas

Three main focus areas were identified from the process. They included: literacy, engagement, and technology. Dr. Miller explained the intent behind each area below.

Literacy. The first focus area was a priority recognized by the board prior to Dr. Miller's arrival. They had identified inconsistencies with literacy interventions, citing multiple reading programs throughout the elementary schools that created disruption. None of the products had been evaluated for effectiveness and student scores on benchmark and end of grade tests remained low. Dr. Miller believed it was critically important for students to be reading on grade level and felt a sense of urgency for literacy to be the main area of focus. She also described how it would be supported by a new literacy framework designed to guide instruction.

Engagement. The second area of focus is centered around student engagement. When Dr. Miller came to CCSD she brought with her a strong belief in the power of student engagement by which learning can be increased. She talked about the importance of engagement, saying:

We want our students to learn about and be able to have real opportunities to solve real-world problems. There is work that we consider in schools that is “throw away work”. They complete a worksheet, get a grade, and throw it away. We want work that continues to evolve that students are excited about and proud of. Work where the students are solving a bigger issue that they will continue to work on through multiple years. We want to inspire and ignite them in areas that they are interested in by giving them some choice.

Technology. Technology is the third area that helps to support student engagement. The technology plan and digital conversion enables the district to put personal computing devices in the hands of all CCSD students. Dr. Miller explained:

We have been proud of our technology in our school district for a while. We would like to continue with that foundation by making it more pervasive and current. We would like to begin our 1:1 initiative where our students have access to a mobile learning device in grades 3 - 12 that they take home with them every day. Their textbooks will be loaded on the device which they will have access to information 24-7. We want learning to occur beyond the classroom day, not to be confined within those walls but to truly be anytime, anywhere.

The district incorporated the strategic plan in every initiative, project, and event that is held. The process was an essential element in allowing Miller to set a new direction for the district.

Incorporation and Outcomes

Digital Conversion and Literacy Framework

The strategic plan was finished in March of 2014 with the main focus of increasing literacy scores. The method was to fast track a digital conversion for the upcoming school year. Miller was able to negotiate a lease agreement with Apple and have it approved by the county commission and school board by June 6th. The district worked through a teacher deployment on June 13th, established a digital literacy

curriculum by July, upgraded the network infrastructure to support connectivity, and began student deployment of devices in August. The school year's deployment began with high school students, then middle and elementary students. It took a lot of work and coordination to pull the project off, but the team made it happen. Pat Tillerson described the events and his staff's disbelief that it was really going to happen. He recalled how staff were jaded by past promises of innovation and district advancements, only to be disappointed by a lack of action. Tillerson recollected the staff meeting when he told his staff about the district's impending digital conversion, saying:

I think that the clear focus across the board has been instrumental, especially with the technology transition and the strategic plan. When I stood in front of the staff in May and told them we were going 1:1, staff made comments such as, "here we go again" and I said, "it's going to happen" and the next day technology was pulling wires. Even though there were some things they didn't agree with, they knew that these needed to happen within the county.

The literacy framework was created by a team of teachers who came together over the summer and outlined key essentials for instruction in a digital environment. It happened during summer break and prior to the iPads and laptops being deployed. The curriculum and instruction team led the initiative with the belief that the digital conversion could not stand alone without a literacy framework and was needed to support an instructional shift. In addition to the new literacy framework, multiple digital resources were purchased that allowed the district to eliminate unnecessary books and transformed the mobile device into a true learning tool.

Perceptions of the Process

Many of the individuals interviewed for this study commented on the value brought by the process of conducting and organizing the strategic planning session. Lee Davis described how it brought people from the community together and being surprised by the support because it was a component that had been missing from previous administrations.

Pat Tillerson also discussed how the strategic plan had been embraced. Literacy was a district concern for many years prior to Dr. Miller's arrival. CCSD had invested heavily in a number of literacy programs without much return on their investment. Tillerson used this example to explain the importance behind making literacy the district's main goal. He discussed how the process enabled the strategic planning committee to establish a common language around literacy that most community stakeholders could articulate.

Casey Sanders credited the strategic planning sessions for helping to achieve consensus around setting a vision for where the district wanted to be. However, Sanders expressed concerns regarding how the district was going to achieve the vision set forth, explaining:

I don't know that we are clear on how to get there but I think we know where we want to go. I see that as a piece of the strategic plan that we are going to have to help answer. I worry that by it being so focused, it leaves out the other disciplines.

Change agent. Dr. Miller came into a district that was operating inconsistently from school to school. The learning organizations were disconnected and lacked

uniformity. There wasn't a clear message or purpose for either district, which added to the extraordinary demands of her position. This sentiment was supported by participants who discussed the concept of a "system of schools" rather than a "school system".

Interviewees recounted previous leadership as lacking a unified message and having unreliable organizational operations. Kerry Perdue believed Dr. Miller's background and previous experiences added to the district's ability to realize change, even if the change created great disruption. He explained:

I think she made a lot of people uncomfortable but everyone knew we were at a breaking point. Everyone knew something had to give and she had the guts to finally make something happen.

Transformational leadership. Dr. Miller was considered a visionary leader by many of the individuals interviewed. She was described as leading with a vision and inspiring others in order to bring about change. As an example, Miller promoted innovative and engaging learning opportunities that was accessible to students 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In order to achieve this vision, she led the charge to put digital devices such as iPads and laptops in the hands of all students and teachers. She invested in online resources in order children to have the tools they needed to learn with whether they were in the classroom or elsewhere.

Miller also promoted school leaders to renovate unused classrooms and traditional media centers in order to create collaborative learning spaces. The creation in building engaging learning environments brought about changes in instructional practices because students were inspired to learn. Harley Haley discussed how Miller used the strategic

planning process to encourage more collaborative classroom environments by making spaces more inviting, comfortable, and colorful.

Miller's leadership and impact on the district, especially considering the circumstances she came into, was significant. Perdue emphasized the challenges she confronted by explaining:

When Loretta came into the district, she had to carry the baggage of the mistrust, the disagreement, and all of the anger from the outgoing administration. I think it was much harder to implement the strategic plan and get people to buy-in because everyone was just angry. If none of that had been happening, and we didn't have to deal with all of that financial stuff and issues with the county, it would have been a much quicker and easier process. She deserves a lot of credit.

New Central Support Offices

Dr. Miller devoted much of her energies to the negotiations for a new central office building which coincided with other demanding responsibilities that included: transition into her new role, learning the community, building her administrative team; and starting a strategic planning process. The school board and county commissioners had settled many outstanding issues, however there were a lot of details that needed to be worked out. Throughout the beginning months of Dr. Miller's new administration conversations and negotiations continued regarding the controversial central office building. The district was making headway with concessions and compromises, which meant for long board meetings that lasted late into the night, working through public comments in support and opposition, and heated discussions with community members. Miller utilized the strategic planning process as a vehicle for building the bridges necessary in order to overcome the resistance faced by previous superintendents. The

fight for a central office had been raging in the community for over 27 years. Miller attributed being an outsider as one factor playing into her ability to bring it to a successful resolution, explaining that she was not hindered by the weight of negative experiences or relationships. As an example, she described her experiences with Sam Smith, the infamous county commissioner who had successfully blocked the project for many years. She explained:

Sam Smith, the county commissioner chair who has probably been one of the most detrimental elected leaders of this county ever - I had no baggage or history with Sam. So, when I saw him, it was like, "I don't know you and you don't know me, let's just talk". We didn't have all the war pains or the scars so it helped a lot. I hadn't sat across the table from him for years like Jackie had trying to negotiate something while being mad at each other. I came in and it was a new start. It was a new relationship. I was very blunt with people and I felt like I had options for staying or going. I was like, "if you want me to help you get there, this is what you've got to do in this process". So, again, I didn't grow up here and I didn't have all those battle scars.

The district moved into the new central office one year and six months after Miller's arrival, which she described as one of the most significant achievements in the district's history because it got people from both sides of the table to talk and resolve issues. The old facilities continued to pull people down because it was a constant reminder of negativity, which is why the new central office was so impactful to the district's overall transformation. It was viewed by many as a symbol of positive change and direction. In reflecting on what the building meant to her and the energy it brought to the community, Miller indicated that it was probably the most important work that she accomplished early on in her tenure as superintendent for CCSD.

Conclusion

Dr. Miller recently completed her fourth year in the district and has kept the strategic plan in the forefront of her decision-making processes through quarterly planning meetings for updates, adjustments, and status reports. Additionally, board members habitually ground their decisions in the plan's priorities and goals. Lee Davis observed that the plan provides direction and clarity as well as brought people together.

The construction of a new central office and initiatives arising from the strategic plan created a significant shift for the district and overall community. The culture has changed to one of celebration and collaboration. And, even though the transformation has yet to result in an increase in student achievement scores, there is an overarching sense of pride when people talk about the district.

Maybe it was timing, where all the conditions were right and everything lined up for a school district that was ready for change, but many of the participants I interviewed felt it was the leader. Elaine Devost credited Miller as the driving force behind the district's transformation bringing energy and momentum to the district and setting off a chain of events that created change. As board chair, Kerry Perdue reflected on the district's transformation:

Looking back, I don't really think there is anything I'd go back and change. I've been on the board for almost five years and, even sitting here now and thinking back, you really start to understand the craziness they we have come from. I think for some of it, we were rolling the dice a little bit but we have never gone through that type of shift and dynamic change. When you start listing out all the different things in the short amount of time it's amazing. It's absolutely crazy. What a journey.

Summary

Dr. Miller understood the significance of her role and the heavy weight of her assignments. She arrived in the district at the tail-end of a toxic, 27-year battle for a central office. Years of fighting had taken a toll and her challenge was to bridge divisions in order to build a central office and heal old wounds. Dr. Miller's brand of leadership is high energy, non-stop, and visionary. She utilized the strategic planning process as if it were a multipurpose tool in her toolkit to gain knowledge, establish and bridge relationships, formalize a new direction, and bring consensus to a divided community.

The following chapter is organized in a parallel manner and aligned with the conceptual framework. Chapter V focuses on the experiences of East City School District's superintendent and administration during the succession and transition phases of leadership. It provides a closer look at the influences strategic planning had on the transition of leadership and developing a course for change.

CHAPTER V

EAST CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Situated in the eastern part of North Carolina, East City School District has experienced a significant shift in demographics over the past two decades. Known as a popular destination, the county generates much of its revenue from the tourism industry. The resulting economic growth has translated into an increase in property values and higher cost of living. It has also attracted families to the area causing a growth in population and rise in the city school system's average daily membership numbers (see Figure 4).

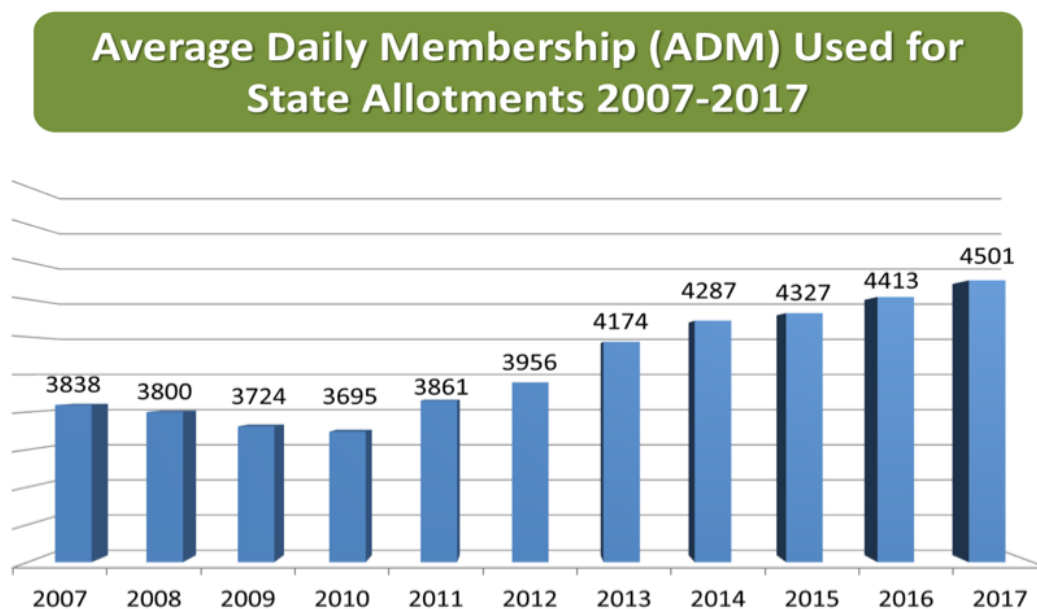


Figure 4. East City School District Average Daily Membership

Two significant outcomes from the shift in demographics have resulted in overcrowding at the schools and a widening income inequality. The improved economy has advanced the gap between the rich and poor as the middle class began moving into less expensive neighboring districts. This dynamic has impacted the teachers as well as the students says Michelle Harris, Director of Learning Services, who was also a former ECSD teacher and literacy coach. Harris had recently been promoted to the district's director position overseeing curriculum when this interview took place. Her experiences in the classroom as well as those at the district office gave her a well-rounded perspective of the community:

The city has *the haves and the have nots* with very little in between with the *haves* being very powerful. That's intensified as the housing costs have gone up. We are seeing a lot of families leave the district and move out to the county for more affordable housing so those in public housing stay and the really wealthy stay and there's just not a lot of middle class. Very few of our teachers live in the city because they can't afford to live in the city.

Historically, ECSD has maintained a reputation for high performance and solid academic growth. The district consistently ranks in the top tier of the best schools in North Carolina. This perception often overshadows the problem of inequities that lie within the district's identified subgroups, specifically children of color. Superintendent, Dr. Patricia Blake explained:

It's a high performing district in general, on the surface. The community support is very high, parent involvement is very high, they do very well with student academics, compared to the rest of the state. The perception was, "We are doing really well, so why do we need to have a plan to change?"

This common opinion was described by Drew Meyer, who stated:

Things were going well for the, obviously, the white, middle and upper-class population. I think there was a false perception because we were under a desegregation order and, honestly, no one spoke about it.

The disparity between white and black students has historically been reflected in school district data. It was noted that regardless of the economic status, approximately 80% of the system's white students achieve grade-level proficiency while less than 30% of black students meet the same benchmark. As a former teacher who had also served as an advocate for Communities in Schools, Mary Gardner also serves as a school board member for ECSD. She is a long-time resident who is integrated into the community and put her children through the school district. These experiences gave her a broad perspective of the inequities plaguing the district. As we discussed these issues, she acknowledged the district was aware of the inequities and had put measures into place to address the problems without much success.

The district's history of racial disparity dates back to its slow response to the 1954 landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional. ECSD waited 15 years before fully integrating in 1969 and, even then, the move was met with resistance. By the late 1980s, there were still schools in the district that were segregated. By 1990, a federal court had imposed a desegregation order that resulted in the district adopting a magnet-themed school choice framework that has produced mixed results, and in some cases, perpetuated the racial divide. As Harris, central office director explained:

The magnet system was designed to achieve racial balance among the city's schools while giving families a choice in which schools their children will attend.

Often those two goals conflicted because enrollment policies weren't adhered to or consistently implemented. This lack of oversight hindered the district's ability to effectively address issues of racial inequality.

Toward the end of 2010, the economy and corresponding population growth were in full swing, which forced the district to think differently about how sites could be restructured to serve its students. The dynamics emphasized long-held concerns over segregation and inequality and caused the school system to focus on two specific areas of need: (a) redistricting and (b) racial disparity. In many ways, administration's efforts only added to the existing issues.

Pre-Arrival

The events precipitating an organization's succession give context for understanding. Studies show variables leading up to the event of succession have a direct impact on the successor (Friedman, 2017; Gabarro, 1987; Gordon & Rosen, 1981; Grusky, 1960; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985). In considering the course and impact of succession, Greenblatt (2013, p. 120) contends that "individual variables in combination with role and institutional variables" are factors that influence succession experiences. Finkelstein, et al. (2009, p. 164) assert that a predecessor's departure and characteristics, such as "background, tenure, power, and personality", all play a dominant role in the successor's experiences.

Predecessor Administration

Prior to Dr. Blake's arrival in 2014, East City School District had two sitting superintendents over the previous 14 years. Tom Jackson, the most recent superintendent of five years, was hired from within the district. Before becoming superintendent, Mr.

Jackson served six months as interim superintendent and four years as associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Mr. Jackson's retirement and subsequent departure, however, were abrupt and ended with a mutual agreement for the school board to buyout the remaining two years on his contract.

By all accounts, Mr. Jackson was a product of and entrenched in the culture of a district rooted in discrimination. While schools were compliant with federal segregation regulations, racial divisions remained. The organizational culture that evolved during his tenure was described as lacking accountability, secretive, and untrusting. The central office leadership was inconsistent, turnover was high, and favoritism was rampant. Racial inequities remained a point of contention. Lynn Wall, Director of School Innovation had the longest tenure on the district's administrative staff. He was present throughout the course of administrative shifts and successions which added insight to our conversation. Some of the administrative moves proved counter-productive and created confusion within the district such as when the lead position in charge of exceptional children was given the responsibility over Title 1 and elementary education. Not sharing the previous leader's instructional philosophy, the new director abandoned the existing and prescribed curriculum approach to direct instruction with a phonics-based EC approach. It was a dramatic shift to classroom instruction and the director left the district prior to final implementation. The disruption caused confusion, mistrust, and resentment toward district leadership.

Predecessor Departure

With the achievement gap widening and misalignment of intervention strategies, Mr. Jackson's administration shielded the school board from negative information. As a result, the school board members had a false sense of satisfaction with district performance. The following are two separate accounts regarding this dynamic. The first is from the perspective of Lynn Wall who had been present through the various changes in district leadership:

He was hyper-aware of letting the board hear the good information that was happening and that was sort of the extent of it. I think, frankly, for a while, what the board thought was happening didn't actually match. We've got this enormous achievement gap between black and white. It's ridiculous, it's startling and makes you want to cry. I don't think that they actually got that information in an obvious and easily digestible fashion. I think the board started asking harder questions of leadership at that time and found that there had been a little bit of glossing of some of the negative aspects and – he left. They bought out his contract.

The second account is from Drew Meyer, who is an elementary school principal that had joined the district the year prior to Dr. Blake's arrival. Meyer describes two events in which there was a lack of transparency and reluctance to address data pointing toward the achievement gap. In the first description, Meyer described being asked to present program and student performance data and recommendations to the school board. However, she was caught off guard when she learned this was the first time the school board had received this type of information, as Meyer explained:

I had some trouble when I needed to present information to the school board that they should have previously seen and known about. I was completely under the assumption that they were aware and this would be old news to them. After I presented, it was clear that I upset some of the higher ups because it had not been

previously presented. It was perceived that I had created these things and was proposing all of these new things. That was my first taste of dysfunction and politics where. How do you have this program and board chairs and superintendents are supposed to sign off on things that nobody even knew about?

Meyer recollected a second event that she viewed as being unusually guarded in terms of data transparency and the district's achievement gap disparities. She was attending a principal's meeting where the achievement gap data was shared at the end of the meeting but not discussed, which underscored the lack of transparency from district leadership.

Meyer explained:

Another point in time that resonates with me – I was at a principal's meeting and some information was about to be shared. But right before it was going to be shared, the person sharing it said, "I'm just going to hold onto this because if I give it to you now, it's going to distract you." So, they held onto it until the end of the meeting when the data was passed out. Once I was able to sit down and review the data, I realized it was our Achievement Gap data. It was terrible and it was going to be distracting in the meeting. I sat here and literally cried because I thought we were rocking it. To find out (#1) that we're not rocking it and (#2) that we are not even talking about that fact that we're not rocking it because that's considered a distraction was deeply depressing.

Once the school board became aware that they were not receiving complete and honest information, they made the decision to end their relationship with the superintendent. Shortly thereafter, the board appointed an interim superintendent who led the district before Dr. Blake was hired.

Organizational Health

Lencioni (2012) defines a healthy organization as one that "has integrity – is healthy – when it is whole, consistent, and complete . . . when it's management, operations, strategy, and culture fit together and make sense" (p. 5). Transparency was

lacking in the district. The achievement gap data provided clarity that prompted stakeholders from all levels of the organization to recognize the district was in a state of crisis. The leadership team was broken and on a failing trajectory. The board understood that fundamental shifts were needed to correct course. It was clear that East City School District was in poor organizational health and its success was being hindered by politics, confusion, low morale, low productivity, and high turnover. Lynn Wall compared it to being in a black box where district plans were made behind closed doors without input from stakeholders who were directly impacted. He spoke about ways in which the atmosphere impacted morale and created a sense of distrust. In concurrence, Mary Gardner elaborated on ways in which the negative culture at the schools and district resulted in schools operating autonomously from the district without operating under a unified message or vision. Along with Wall and Gardner, Principal Arin Duncan added another perspective to the situation as she described deep divisions between the district and schools. Her path with ECSD began as a college intern which turned into a teaching career. She was serving as a director overseeing secondary curriculum when Dr. Blake arrived as the new superintendent. Duncan served at the district level for eighteen months under Dr. Blake when she applied for and was appointed to the principal's position at the district's only middle school. As she reflected on her experiences, Duncan mentioned the district's lack of strategic direction as a cause for the unhealthy dynamics, stating:

We didn't have a strategic plan as a district. We didn't have anything guiding us other than people doing what they were used to doing or what they wanted to do. The district and the schools were on different pages. We were a system of schools and not a school system. We were divided.

Hiring Process

In his analysis of executive leadership succession systems, Friedman (2017) developed a framework for examining how decision-making processes occurred during the pre-arrival phase. Friedman's (2017, p.2) four-stage model included: 1) establishing the need for a succession event; 2) determining selection criteria; 3) selecting candidates; and 4) choosing the candidates. His findings point to the hiring process as an integral component of an organization's overall succession plan and suggests it is an indicator for successful integration into the organization. Factors leading up to Dr. Blake's hiring also contributed to the overall succession experiences.

Interim. Dr. Long was appointed interim upon Mr. Jackson's departure. Being well-respected in the community and having a long-standing experience in educational leadership, Dr. Long was seen as an advocate who could ease the district through the discomfort of transition. The school board announced her appointment by issuing a statement indicating that the district would take a comprehensive approach to searching for a new superintendent. Dr. Long had agreed to stay as long as necessary in order for the district to find the most qualified candidate. The process was designed to be transparent and stakeholders from all levels of the community. When interviewed by the local newspaper, Dr. Long framed her interim leadership as helping the school system move forward by being a source of support and stability. Participants for this study held a favorable view of Dr. Long and saw her as a calming force during the district's most challenging times of transition. Words used to describe her leadership included: *steady, considerate, competent, kind, and fair.*

Dr. Long's appointment ran from August 2013 until June 2014 while the school board began the search for a new superintendent. During this time, she approached the interim position as more of a sitting superintendent rather than a temporary placeholder. She made impactful decisions that were inherited by the next superintendent. Sal Scott was an elementary principal who had served multiple leadership roles in the district over the past 20 years. She is well respected and had earned the reputation as a change agent who could turn a school around. Scott recounted a controversial situation prior to Blake's arrival in which an alternative program was moved out of a building into temporary mobile units to accommodate displaced students while a new school was being built. She explained how Dr. Long took up the reins and expertly managed the complex situation with ease. There were other examples of restructuring and transitional moves made by Dr. Long that Dr. Blake inherited. When I asked Dr. Blake about her experiences with the interim piece of leadership succession, she explained that it was situational. It depends on the interim a superintendent follows, as well as school board expectations for their interim appointment. She said:

Dr. Long's approach was, "If I'm going to sit in this chair, I'm going to run this district like it's my district", and so she did. Following an interim who is acting as superintendent, and not as an interim, can be challenging because it's a temporary thing. So, they created a temporary plan, a leadership expectation [knowing] that someone, in less than a year, is going to come in and either change or have to adopt.

Superintendent search. The school board's superintendent search was a national process managed by an outside agency. Following Mr. Jackson's sudden retirement, negative publicity was fueled by misinformation and gossip. The board wanted an open

interview process. They felt that it was in the best interest of both the public and the candidates to keep the search transparent by publicizing the leading applicants for the position.

Interview process. Three outside finalists were narrowed down from 100 applicants. The board's hiring process included two district visits by each of the candidates with one visit consisting of a town hall gathering where the candidates were asked questions by community members. These town hall meetings allowed the community, parents, district employees and students to ask questions and listen to each candidate's answers as well as gauge their interest in and commitment to the district.

Final interview and board expectations. By this point in the interview process, Dr. Blake had a firm grasp of the challenges faced by the district. She understood the board's expectation and district need for addressing the achievement gap and developing a plan for future student growth. In preparing for the interview, she knew her approach to working toward solutions for these needs was going to begin with strategic planning. Below she explains her thought process:

In doing the research prior to the interview, I was seeing these gaps and understood what needed to happen. My wheels were turning around strategic planning and strategic goals even before I went into the interview. In my past districts, we lived continuous improvement and peer review and this was a district that didn't have any elements of that.

During the interview, Dr. Blake indicated to the board that she was not the type of person that would settle in and become complacent with the district's trend of high student achievement. She told them:

Fortunately, through the interview process, I was very clear. I even said in my interview, “You need to understand who you are hiring. I am not okay with all students not being successful. I will not come in and ride the wave of excellence, because there are some really great things that are happening in that district, but we could always be better. That means that I’m going to have to make some changes. And if you’re okay with that, I need your support.”

Dr. Blake described the board’s response as being completely supportive. Following the announcement of her hiring, Dr. Blake got a standing ovation from the city schools staff. Her arrival was much celebrated by the board and the community. Comments from board members that appeared in the local media at the time of her hiring depicted a sense of excitement and hope for the district. Several of the board members emphasized the decision came about after an intensive national search in which the community made the final decision. One board member referred to her appointment as a game changer for not only the district but also the city.

Insider / Outsider Status

Examining the differences between external and internal successors, David (2014) argues that outside successors are hired when a significant change is needed in order to “bring a fresh perspective unencumbered by old political alliances and strategic and operational approaches that are out of touch with the current markets” (p. 6). This was the case in Dr. Blake’s situation.

Previous to Dr. Blake’s external hire, Mr. Jackson was an internal candidate, promoted from within and moved from associate superintendent to the superintendent’s position. Mr. Jackson had a working knowledge of the organizational culture, operational processes, and established relationships throughout the district. However, Mr. Jackson’s background was not rooted in the area of curriculum and instruction and he only had one

member of his leadership team that had an instructional background. This placed the district at a significant disadvantage. The lack of knowledge presented challenges that handicapped the administration from being able to fully address pressing issues related to the achievement gap and overcrowding. The subsequent dynamics created a situation in which the leadership's communication with the school board primarily focused on positive and concealed negative situations and information.

As a result of this experience, the board was looking for change in leadership, change in culture, and change in direction. They wanted new leadership that could offer different strategies and perspectives but they also wanted a break from the culture of negativity and mistrust that was established by the previous administration. In order to do this, the board focused on candidates from outside the district.

The desire for change was a contributing factor leading the board's selection of finalists, each of the top three were external candidates. As outsiders, these individuals would be able to bring fresh perspectives to the district. They were not personally invested in the processes of the past nor were they tied to the culture and beliefs that were holding the district back. Dr. Blake's brought a fresh approach that would have otherwise been difficult from someone hired internally. Additionally, and in contrast with her predecessor, Dr. Blake's past experiences were rich in the area of curriculum and instruction, beginning her career in education as a science teacher and moved from there to assistant principal, principal, director, and assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. One path led to another and, as she explained her journey to the superintendency for ECSD.

Successor Entry

Referring to princes, Machiavelli (2005) observes the difficulties of new leadership, stating:

The difficulties they have in acquiring it rise in part from new rules and methods which they are forced to introduce to establish their government and its security. And it ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, that to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. (p. 74)

The challenges of and variables impacting leadership succession are the subject of numerous studies (Amado, 2018; Charan, 2005; Ciampa & Dotlich, 2015; Friedman, 2017). As with Drs. Blake and Miller, many leaders come into an organization with the expectation for implementing change. Both superintendents approached succession using a traditional strategic planning model, however it is important to assess unique experiences that impacted the decision-making processes for each superintendent.

Dr. Blake's entry into the district was met with fanfare and celebration. She had the school board's full support behind her because of shared expectations that she would lead a cleanup and address the culture of institutionalized inequality. With this level of support, Blake immediately began establishing her administration and preparing for the strategic planning process as a way to start critical conversations and implement change.

Establishing Relationships

Inheriting your predecessor's team is a common challenge faced by incoming superintendents. From the outset, she had limited familiarity with the members of administrative staff and the school principals. Dr. Blake spoke to this situation:

That is the hard part about joining a team that's really not *your team*. You really have to convince them to be your team or be on your team through modeling and evidence and all those good.

Dr. Blake also recognized the importance of assessing each team member's role and potential contributions toward meeting the district's new direction. She saw establishing relationships as her first priority on the job. She explained:

Job one is to really talk to teachers and staff and the community, to see what they feel our priorities should be and where we need to begin. I'm not planning on coming in here and trying to all of a sudden change the world. I know this is already a great district and the people here have the wisdom we need to go forward.

Dr. Blake approached this process through holding individual meetings, making site visits, asking lots of questions, and listening carefully to the responses. These conversations gave her a sense of the capabilities of key staff, an understanding of the community, and the challenges and opportunities the district was facing. This strategy helped her to develop trust and communicate transparency, both which were needed in order for her to move forward with instituting deep change. As Director of Student Services, Logan Maxwell had been with the district for a several years and was familiar with the previous administration. She described how Blake made visiting the schools a priority, having meaningful conversations with the staff, and took a measured approach to making changes.

Acquiring Perspective

When Dr. Blake was appointed superintendent of East City School District, she started on the first of July, that meant she had until the end of August to learn as much

about the district as possible before the school year got under way. She did the conventional things such as reviewing the budget, looking at school performance data, and visiting each school site and facility. But, she also knew it was priority to talk to teachers, staff, and the community to see what they perceived as district priorities. This feedback was invaluable for allowing her to begin the work of addressing district needs.

Post-Arrival Transition

Establishing New Expectations

The eastern part of the state had long struggled with issues of racial equity and it was clearly reflected in the data of East City School District. Many school leaders and community members carried ingrained cultural perceptions toward the minority groups, which had a profound and negative influence. Racism was compounded by deep generational poverty and a shared mistrust from the black community. As a result, relationships and goodwill have been difficult to establish. Dr. Blake quickly learned that she had to take this sensitive reality into consideration when reaching out and establishing relationships.

When asked if she felt being a black female superintendent helped provide context to and bridge the gaps, Dr. Blake responded that being a black female, (female specifically and also black) brought an element of challenge, especially trying to bring *change* into a conversation about race and/or equity. When other participants were asked if they felt that Dr. Blake, being a black female superintendent, helped provide context to and bridge the gaps, Michelle Harris agreed, adding that Blake brought an awareness around issues of inequities that started conversations in the district. It also enabled her to

put processes in place that helped to address disproportionate structures. Mary Gardner commented on the district's readiness for a black female superintendent, saying:

She was a young, black female and I don't know that this city was ready for that. We've had female superintendents - one of the best superintendents we've ever had was a female but we never had, and especially, not a young black female. She came in with all the right ideas. The term "excellence with equity" is really what she was about and it wasn't about equality, it was about equity. We have a long way to go as far as that's concerned.

School board chair, Sylvia Smith had made a career as a social worker for the county. Through the years, Smith has worked alongside ECSD student services department in her role as social worker. She took a leading role in advocating for children in crisis situations. As an African-American female, Smith understood challenges faced by Dr. Blake. While she sees her role of board chair as advocating for all children, she has special insight into the views of the black community and their distrust of district leadership, regardless of race or gender. Smith explained:

I've heard some people in the black community say, "She's not black like us." Like, she's too middle class so she's not going to understand. The distrust is so deep and I think it's just people saying, you know, ECSD thinks they are doing something by hiring a black woman but she doesn't really represent us and we don't trust her and we still don't trust the schools.

Dr. Blake gained perspective and knowledge from understanding how these norms regarding racial inequities contributed to the achievement gap and how they were magnified in the views of the district personnel. She knew that changing these dynamics was going to be a challenge; however, she felt she would be able to work through these

difficult conversations with the full support of the school board and community behind her.

Strategic Plan Introduction

Dr. Blake received full support from the school board during her transition into the superintendency. They gave her the leeway she needed to institute change and establish new expectations for her administration. She described her first year at ECSD as being met with a collegial spirit toward approaching the district's work with new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. The following comment by Dr. Blake reflected her feelings about this period of her new administration:

The board really knew the line between the “we need you to do the work and we are not supposed to be doing the work”. And that was amazing. The transition through the strategic plan, through the survey data, through that whole first year, was really, I look back now and, it was almost too good. Right? You know it was seamless for that transition because we were telling them some pretty awful stuff sometimes. They were like, “yeah, let's change it” and were right on it.

Working hand-in-hand with the school board and district stakeholders, Dr. Blake developed the five-year strategic plan with proposals for moving forward. The board chair at the time remarked:

I think the strategic plan set a new direction for the district. It follows existing board policy to ensure that each of our schools are reflective of the diversity of the district. It made for difficult conversations, but it has been a transformative process.

The strategic plan provided a framework for making tough decisions around uncomfortable issues. Overarching goals were developed to enhance academic achievement, address and plan for growth while maximizing facility capacity and expand

preschool options to elementary schools. The subsequent recommendations called for restructuring measures in the form of admission and school assignment structures, redistricting, and school redesign.

Strategic Planning Process

Forrester (1990) is recognized for his development of Systems Dynamics. Focusing on computer analytics, his model provided a practical analysis to show the interconnectedness among an organization's processes. Senge (1998) expanded on Forrester's work by adding the human dimension of mindset. Senge's approach to systems thinking incorporates the process of: 1) seeing systems; 2) seeing process; 3) seeing internal/external; and 4) seeing consciously. Anderson and Anderson (2010) use Senge's model to examine conscious process thinking as an approach to leadership. They argue that leaders "must see their organizations as multi-dimensional, interconnected, conscious living systems in constant and perpetual motion" (p. 223). Dr. Blake understood the importance of looking at the whole organization as an approach to instituting meaningful change.

Prior Strategic Plan

Beginning with the 2011-2012 school year, the district's administration determined the problem could be addressed through modifying the school calendar to incorporate a year-round instructional model. Mr. Jackson, the superintendent at the time, believed modifying the calendar would help close the gaps and address population growth. To gather stakeholder input, the district began a two-year initiative for what they called the Strategic Planning Research Process. The process involved sending out over

3,500 surveys to families, students, and stakeholders that asked two questions relating to the issue of extending school time. The feedback was intended to support a framework for restructuring the school calendar. While there was a lot of attention and work around these concerns, nothing of substance materialized and a formal plan was never created. Central office director, Lynn Wall, attributed the lack of action to the organizational dysfunction, administrative changes, and Mr. Jackson's impending departure. Correspondingly, Dr. Blake described arriving to ECSD and seeing "totes full of survey data" that never made it into a formalized plan.

Such planning involves a big commitment on the part of district stakeholders. The participants did not feel that their efforts and contributions produced satisfactory results. Having gone through the two-year process with nothing to show, the stakeholders were fittingly skeptical and the idea of beginning another planning process was unappealing. Dr. Blake realized she needed an angle to encourage acceptance of starting a new process.

Process for A New Strategic Plan

With the achievement gap data as a conversation starter, Dr. Blake spoke about how she used dialog around equity as an opportunity to begin strategy planning sessions. She explained:

They were also, at the same time, having this conversation about equity and so I used that lens to convince people we needed a plan because we were obviously not administering what we thought were our beliefs, which was that all students would do well and we had this enormous achievement gap. That helped us lead to the change and the conversation really, solely about equity, in the midst of, "We don't even have a plan".

She understood that strategic conversations and stakeholder input were needed in order to create buy-in and set district priorities, objectives, and expected outcomes. She began the strategic planning process immediately upon arrival to the district.

Strategic planning was embedded in Blake's educational career, which she attributed to the training and foundations that were instilled in her as a component of continuous improvement. These areas of focus eased her entry into the superintendent's role in the sense that strategic planning and goal setting were second nature to her leadership. However, while Blake was experienced with strategic planning and knew what needed to happen, she also believed the conversations needed to be facilitated by someone not associated with the district. She felt that if she was the person facilitating the process, it would look as if she had been judging the district she was preparing to lead. She didn't want the process to be perceived in a negative way. She explained:

I immediately called Dr. Brooks and said, "We don't have a plan and I don't want to be the first person to tell these folks that we need to be better." I need someone from the outside to come tell them that. I had the plan that there was going to be an external person to come in and help me send that message. It wouldn't be this new person coming in and judging what had been going on.

As with Dr. Miller who wanted to be part of the conversation rather than the leader of the process, Dr. Brooks agreed to facilitate and guide the strategic planning process for ECSD. He offered a clear method by which they were able to set objectives, generate and evaluate strategies, monitor results, and obtain commitments. The decision making process incorporated formal strategic planning procedures. Drs. Brooks and Blake agreed

that this type of procedure would challenge complacent acceptance of the status quo as well as create a common language around the district's major challenges.

Brooks employed the same template he used for Central County School District. Discussion points for stakeholder conversations entered around five central questions: 1) Who are we? 2) Where are we now? 3) What is important to us? 4) Where are we going? and 5) What are our next steps? Development of vision, direction, purpose; priorities; and expected outcomes culminated from the conversations and group activities. These foundational questions led into more focused questions designed around specific areas important to the Dr. Blake. She spoke about how this part of the process was helpful to her, saying:

I was able to plan conversations around issues that I felt were of great importance to me as a new superintendent as well as current and upcoming issues facing the district. I also targeted areas that I felt could help me be more successful in serving as the district's leader. I framed some questions around how different departments and operational areas could work together more effectively. It was a great preliminary part of the process that helped me refine my direction and purpose.

The 5-month endeavor was kicked off with an assessment of district demographics and issuing a survey that was sent out to community, parents, and district stakeholders. A district steering committee was formed, consisting of 40 members and composed of a cross-section of school administrators, teachers, parents, community stakeholders, and students. After reviewing input from 800 survey responses, work began on establishing goals and strategies. Collaboration continued with two stakeholder summits and five task force meetings that were scheduled and advertised as being open to

the public. All interviewees felt the process was a highly effective, collaborative effort involving multiple stakeholders at all levels of the community. The resulting 5-year plan identified priorities needed in order to increase the achievement level for all groups while reducing the achievement gap.

Final Product

The culminating product, *Excellence with Equity!* produced a 24-page plan that outlined goals and strategies centered around the district's new vision, mission, tagline, logo, and guiding principles. The plan was clear and concise with the theme of equity interwoven throughout. Dr. Blake talked about the experience and how they began the process by purposefully addressing topics that most people could agree on. She explained:

We focused on things like early childhood [which honestly in K-12 education, no one really owns yet so it doesn't feel real personal] but what a big bang for your buck for students. Right? So, we focused on that concept of early childhood and the whole child and how it leads to what we now have. To lay the groundwork for what needs to change K-12. That was how we laid out a beginning step to change.

She also discussed how smooth the process went during her transition and first year as superintendent. She credited the support she received from the board and staff as being instrumental in making the process a seamless success; and because of the support, the plan was able to target specific areas of need and called for drastic changes in operational and instructional approaches. Blake explained how these changes were integrated throughout the plan, from the goals and strategies to the advertising and branding of the

district. She believed these features were key to bringing about district transformation.

She explained:

There were good reasons why we needed to rebrand ourselves to show our diverse, cohesive community. We were very strategic about making sure there was black, brown, and white kids in everything. We did billboards and advertisements and all of that with our new logo because it had to do with diversity and was embedded in our plan. It was a tree with different color leaves. It was all very intentional. The logo was significant because the previous logo was just the first initial of our district – so, it didn't say anything. It felt stale and institutional and that's what we were trying to move away from. The fun tree with the leaves was where we were trying to go.

Strategic Plan Focus Areas

The culminating priorities that emerged from the strategic planning process began with the overarching goal of preparing every student to be college and career ready. This goal would be accomplished through three main focus areas: (1) Early Childhood, (2) Academic Achievement, and (3) The Whole Child. The district's strategic plan expounds on these focus areas and provide a frame for understanding the opportunity and challenges encountered during implementation.

Focus area 1: Early childhood. The purpose of this focus area is to expand access to district preschool programs and ensure preschool students meet district achievement goals. Dr. Blake understood that importance of early intervention and the role that preschool can serve. She pointed to years of research showing that a child's school readiness and vocabulary is directly influenced by family dynamics and income. Blake spoke passionately about ways in which inequities increase knowledge gaps that develop between birth and kindergarten, leaving many children far behind their peers

before they enter school. She explained that the district's preschool had operated since the mid-1990's and has historically attracted students through a variety of enrollment options such as tuition-based, NC-PRE K, and Early Head Start. The district's center houses all preschool children at one dedicated site. Blake discussed the need to expand the programs out to the elementary schools as well rethink the structure of the school itself:

We had a great need for more preschool slots and we had a preschool standing building and an opportunity to serve more students and we had a wait list. From what we saw in our data, our kids were behind before they even got to us. We wanted to capture some 3-and 4-year old students, so our strategic plan was, "How do we do that?" and "How do we open up those numbers?". Knowing that we were growing a small percentage every year – we decided to do a couple of pilot classrooms inside our buildings to allow us to have an opportunity to expand (not just in the preschool building) and provide for us an opportunity to also create better relationships with parents.

Drew Meyer, Principal and Director, described the preschool's structure and how they were creating homogenous groups of high-needs children. Historically, all of the funding sources had been designated exclusively for at-risk, high-needs, and low-income families. The children receiving services were segregated based on their needs and housed in one stand-alone facility. This dynamic negatively attributed to the district's long struggle with racial imbalances.

The vision to expand and grow the preschool was the first priority in the strategic plan's main areas of focus. This called for the district to begin embedding preschool classrooms in targeted elementary schools. The district expanded the preschool program by moving a couple of classrooms offsite. They also increased the number of 3 and 4-

year-olds being served. In addition to these changes, the district wanted to capitalize on the building's underutilized space by implementing a magnet-themed, Montessori Primary School. This move addressed district growth and created more balanced classrooms.

With the wheels in motion and board approval for school restructuring, Drew Meyer talked about the rationale behind this approach being tied to growth and equity. There was consensus around continuing to implement the preschool program while also growing the tuition component. This perpetuated the growth of more balanced, heterogeneous classrooms while providing a quality early childhood education for *all* children, not just a certain group of children, which was a sentiment woven throughout the strategic plan. As a result of the changes, the district was able to create seven preschool classrooms and two Montessori Pre-k and kindergarten classrooms at their main campus. They also added \satellite, preschool classrooms located at three of the district's elementary schools.

Focus area 2: Academic achievement. The purpose of this focus area is to strengthen core instruction so that all subgroups will be successful without the need for supplemental instruction as measured by number of students receiving interventions. Glaring instructional inequities emerged as conversations around academic achievement highlighted the use of tracking throughout the schools. Committee members began examining levels of courses and looking at which students were assigned to different levels of the same curriculum, with some being more rigorous than others. Evidence of ability-grouping and tracking was apparent from elementary to secondary. This was

especially obvious with the AIG population. Michelle Harris talked about the dynamics and gave the following example:

In K-2, we were pulling kids out to do AIG nurturing and the kids looked “white”. So, you don’t identify AIG until 3rd grade and your nurturing “giftedness” but you’ve already decided who you’re going to serve. And really, it was the kids who came prepared, who had some skills, etc. etc. So, we shifted that – we didn’t take it away – but we did push-in nurturing which meant that the AIG specialist went into the class and all the kids were getting this nurturing.

The process of de-tracking students proved more difficult than the actual conversation. When they used data as a focal point for facilitating conversation and helping the stakeholders and community begin to understand the damaging effects of categorizing and labeling students. Everyone seemed onboard until processes were put into action and people realized the change was going to personally impact them. Dr. Blake explained:

I would say, “We need to de-track the 6th grade and I would refer back to strategy 1.1.” . . . “Here is what we said, here is where we are moving.” Some of the exact same stakeholders would say, “We didn’t know that’s what it meant.” or “What about the accelerated math pathway for my kid?”. It immediately would become personal. You’re writing a plan about making the district better and then all of the sudden, now *your kid* is sitting in a classroom with kids you didn’t think they would be sitting with.

Focus area 3: The whole child. The purpose of this focus area is to assess and restructure operational systems in an effort to address the needs of the whole child by providing opportunities to ensure all students graduate college and/or career ready. Focusing on the whole child was an outgrowth of the early childhood and academic achievement areas and looks at structural barriers that prevent student success.

Restructure initiatives. The plan started with an examination of the district’s preschool offerings as discussed in Focus Area 1: Early Childhood. The approach led to an increase in preschool slots available to parents, establishing a Montessori Primary School, and creating satellite preschools at three elementary schools within the district.

Student support services. Increasing student support services was another component of the *Whole Child* focus area. As a social worker, Sylvia Smith, worked often with the school district to address student needs and is an advocate for children with mental health issues. Smith understood the importance of social and emotional wellbeing and expressed dismay that the district did not have a student support services department or strong leadership in this area. Being elected to the school board and named board chair gave her the ability to promote ways in which the department would allow the district to authentically address the *whole child*. Smith was very proud of this accomplishment and believed the students of ECSD would be better served under the new department.

Incorporation and Outcomes

The outcomes of the plan varied in implementation and approach. While some of the goals were not realized, the plan achieved the goal of creating a dramatic shift in how the district served the children and community. The following provides details of how the initiatives were delivered and received. It provides context for the plan’s call for equity in education.

Admission and Assignment Structures

Soon after her entry, Dr. Blake pinpointed two existing enrollment processes, the magnet school model and out-of-district enrollment, as areas contributing to

overcrowding and issues of equity. These built-in practices often inflamed the problems by causing the more popular schools to be over capacity while the less popular schools often had empty classrooms.

The magnet school model. Created to allow school choice and address the civil rights mandate, the magnet model was based upon the intent to diversify students in hopes of raising low achievers. The district's website describes the purpose of the magnet model, as a key feature of the magnet model that allows elementary students the ability to attend the school whose theme best matches their interests while promoting high achievement, cultural diversity, and choice of curriculum delivery.

As well-intentioned as these efforts have been, the results have not always produced the positive outcomes envisioned. Often, the model's application and enrollment processes favored children of privilege rather than the children which the initiative was targeted at helping.

Out of district enrollment. Since 2014, the system has seen a steady rise in the number of students. The upward trend is projected to continue with the prediction of an additional enrollment of approximately 5000 more students over by 2020.

Prior to becoming one of the state's most popular tourist destinations, enrollment was in decline. These dynamics resulted in an open-door policy for out-of-district transfers in order for the system to grow. By the time of Blake's arrival, the district was over-capacity and transfer students were adding to the ballooning classroom sizes. Blake recognized a first step to strengthening out-of-district transfer procedures was by revising

outdated board policies. The strategic plan provided a platform for Dr. Blake to make changes to these areas.

Restructuring Recommendations and Community Pushback

In addition to enrollment and assignment changes, the following suggestions for restructure and school redesign were also recommended by the strategic planning committee. They included calendar modifications, AIG programming structures, and redesigning school offerings in the district's western zone.

Calendar modifications. When Dr. Blake arrived, the district had four elementary schools and one under construction. Only one of the schools, Freeman Hill Elementary School, operated on a year-round calendar model while the rest used a traditional calendar model.

The previous administration felt the calendar cut down on summer learning loss and based their decision on the premise that children of poverty perform better academically when summer breaks are reduced. Freeman Hill had been selected based on high socio-economic data as well as their free or reduced lunch percentages. However, Blake and the strategic planning committee saw it different. Moving the school back to a traditional calendar eliminated registration delays and provided an opportunity to capitalize on the smaller class sizes in order to accommodate the district's continued growth. The strategic planning committee voted 9-6 in favor of returning the school to the traditional calendar and the school board agreed with the recommendation.

AIG programming shifts. The district's AIG program began with an enrichment or nurturing program for kindergartners. Identified children, who are believed to have the

skills necessary to be successful in an advanced curriculum, are enrolled in a pull-out model that provides special intervention session outside of the classroom. The program perpetuated institutionalized inequalities and was in direct contrast with strategic plan's objective, *Excellence with Equality*. Michelle Harris talked about the district's gifted children's program:

The AIG group of kids...everybody here loves to be gifted, we love to over-identify...41% of our middle school students are identified AIG while less than 10% of those students are non-white, even though 45% of our population is non-white. That just gives you an idea, over time, we created these systems that really worked for certain kids but don't work for others.

She further discussed the irony in identifying children so early, saying:

In K-2, we were pulling kids out to do AIG nurturing and the kids looked "white". So, you don't identify AIG until 3rd grade and your nurturing "giftedness" but you've already decided who you're going to serve. And really, it was the kids who came prepared, who had some skills, etc.

Dr. Blake worked to shift the practice of the nurturing component of AIG identification in the schools. While the program was not removed, they changed to a push-in model of nurture that required the AIG specialist to go into the classroom to provide the specialized instruction to all the students rather than a small, identified group of pull-out children. The move angered many parents which Michelle Harris described:

In this community, historically, there is a population of the community who has had a lot of decision-making ability in the school system. This group is middle class/upper class, mostly white people who have the political power, etc. When we started making decisions and doing some things that were not aligned with what the adults wanted. I'm not talking about teachers, I'm talking about parents – they pushed back. Some of them did it in a really negative way. Families hit the

roof. Parents called the board, we had to have all of these meetings with the AIG parents, and it was dramatic. That was a hard thing to go through with Dr. Blake.

As more parents came forward to complain, the school board began to feel the pressure.

Dr. Blake explained:

My board members had a hard time once the political pressures started to come through. When we started talking about tracking, when we started talking about opportunities for AIG and changing that criteria, and our loud parents came out.

As one of five board members, Mary Gardner acknowledge that the school board had anticipated pushback to the change but they supported Dr. Blake and believed in the new direction she was taking the district.

School zone redesign. The district made multiple recommendations for addressing issues of equity and overcrowding but the one that garnered the most attention related overhauling the make-up and design concentrated in the west zone at Freeman Hill elementary school and the district's preschool building. Freeman Hill had already seen a change in administration and moved to a modified, year-round calendar. Now the school was bracing for additional changes called for by the new administration and completion of the strategic plan.

The proposal was to create a sister-school model where the preschool building would add kindergarten through third grade classes and use the neighboring elementary K-5 grade school to accommodate grades four through eight. The recommendation called for redistricting kindergarten, first, and second grade students and adding preschool classes to each of the surrounding elementary schools. The plans dovetailed with the

goals of addressing student growth and increasing access to early childhood interventions.

The reaction from the community was swift. Dr. Blake described the proposal and the community's response, explaining that the leadership team's proposal was an effort to address the upcoming situation of overcrowding at the school but she was unprepared for the community's reaction, saying:

The proposal from the leadership team was to make Freeman Hill a 5-8 school to take care of the overflow of the kids that were coming in this big bubble did not go over well. It was interesting because it didn't go over well for the Freeman Hill community who lived around there and loved that school and wanted to go to that school...after conversations and meetings, they started to get what we were trying to do. It was the Patton Elementary School parents who decided to take up the charge. They actually caused a disruption in board meetings and things like that.

Parents and school staff members felt blindsided by the proposal to divide the school. They blamed the district for failure to communicate the plans and complained that their voices were not being heard. Parents complained that their voices were not considered in any part of the decision-making process. As a result, parents began organizing campaigns to challenge the suggested changes. They formed demonstrations to protest outside school board meetings with signs that read, *More Time, Transparency, Inclusion*. They also wrote letters to the local paper and even created an online petition that garnered 177 signatures in 36 hours. Local media outlets published various accounts of the parent opposition to the proposed split, citing over 300 participants attending a board meeting. The level of discontent had grown to the point where the mayor had become involved, directing the school board members to slow down by explaining that

people were tired of being excluded from the decision-making processes and not feeling as if their voices were being heard. Dr. Blake expressed her frustration, saying:

We had been hashing this out for six months, we have looked at the numbers upside down and inside out, this is the proposal the team came up with. We began with eight proposals and narrowed it to one. They were all involved in that conversation and so was the community but as soon as we put one proposal on the table, people acted like they had never seen it.

Throughout her discussions with the board, Dr. Blake kept redirecting the conversation back to the data in which the information revealed there were over 100 additional students in the middle school and they were exceeding capacity. As a result of the highly-charged, political nature of the situation, the board took a different approach and opted to open another district facility as a middle school site.

Perceptions of the Process

When Dr. Blake arrived in the district, she became very aware of district practices that perpetuated inequities and racial biases. The strategic plan paved the way for district change regarding how it served all students. By all accounts, it was a successful venture that altered the conversation around student achievement and issues of equity. This shared vision was articulated by everyone I interviewed. They each understood the overarching goals of the plan and could recite the tagline and name the plan's three focus areas.

Dr. Blake talked about the process, explaining how it helped bring people together around goals that everyone could support. She felt the process was solidified by publicizing the document, which generated rich conversation and awareness about the

achievement gap, racial equity, and what that meant ECSD. There was overwhelming agreement among participants regarding the effectiveness of the process's format. Dynamic conversations came about from gathering community members together for round-table discussions that culminated in defined action items for the district.

Often strategic plans have confusing language and mixed messages that get bogged down with inconsistent goals and objectives. Unlike many plans of this type, Harris and Duncan were very pleased with the clarity and consistency that came from the district's focused message. They each credited the strategic plan for laying a foundation that enabled the district to be more consistent and cohesive in message. The process built a scalable framework that was necessary to address the achievement gap and make gains.

Conclusion

In its ideal form, the superintendent's role is to champion the cause for educating students and preparing them for a world outside of the classroom walls. The role requires charting new territory, visualizing what is possible, and engaging the school district and community in conversations regarding the student needs. It is about charging forward with a collective vision that can be turned into a reality for the students of the district. By all accounts, Dr. Blake exemplified the traits of a visionary leader. She envisioned a district that focused on teaching and learning where students were engaged and empowered to excel beyond boundaries.

Every participant interviewed for this study mentioned Dr. Blake's focus on the children, her vision for continuous improvement, and the push to prioritize issues of inequities. The comments below reflect their perceptions of the new superintendent's

vision for district improvement. Many participants stated that Dr. Blake came to the district with a vision for what she wanted the district to become. Participants reflected on Dr. Blake's visionary leadership describing how she arrived confident with a vision for moving the district forward. Blake's student-centered mindset was core to her beliefs, which was exhibited in the ways she put children's needs first. She dedicated her time to instituting changes that ensured approaches to a more student-centered mindset.

Dr. Blake completed two and a half years of work within the district before announcing that she would be moving into another North Carolina superintendency position. In her pursuit to upend and transform the district's long-broken system of inequities, Dr. Blake learned that the best-intentioned reforms can trigger unintended consequences. She also learned that converting established belief systems and ingrained practices requires more patience, indulgence and attentiveness to politics than she may have realized. That being said, Dr. Blake's unconventional style and willingness to challenge the entrenched ways of the past allowed her to set a foundation for change.

Blake made multiple, controversial decisions that included: bridling the number of incoming, out-of-district transfers; filling under-enrolled schools through the magnet program; and allocating available slots for pre-school classes at the most popular schools. Her decisions were widely viewed as a painful but necessary step for a system experiencing high student growth.

Blake's supporters say she has brought passion, urgency, and conviction to issues that had been marginalized. There is broad agreement that her major accomplishment has been to change the conversation around equity and how people view the *whole child*. It

was often mentioned that Blake's drive to transform the district raised expectations and forced members to be more accountable. Considered a true agent of change, staff and community defiance did not prevent her from trying to bring about change. The adjectives, *determination* and *drive* were common descriptors used to characterize Blake's leadership style; however, participant observations regarding her determination were typically followed by an acknowledgement of the disruption that was associated with the intense level of rapid-fire change that was introduced. As an example, Sal Scott stated:

Nobody in the past had determination like Dr. Blake. Nobody had the mindset of, "I'm going to do whatever it takes to improve the quality of instruction, even if it means making people upset."

Blake's calls for change alienated individuals who had benefited from the past structures. They felt the modifications would result in them losing access to the best education for their children. Interview participants often referred to it as *zero-sum thinking*, which created barriers to Blake's leadership and proposals.

Changing of the Guard

Dr. Blake announced her resignation in December 2016 and left the district during April 2017. As with the previous superintendent's departure, Dr. Long was called upon to serve as interim until a new superintendent was seated. As before, the district conducted a nationwide search but modified the criteria by eliminating the town hall public meetings with the prospective candidates. Dr. Peterson was hired and began her new post July 1,

2017 with a mandate from the board to carry on the work around equity that Blake had set forth.

Interview participants appreciated Dr. Blake's legacy and welcomed Dr. Peterson's arrival with many describing ways in which the new superintendent would build on Blake's work, as Michelle Harris explained:

Luckily, the board worked really hard to find someone who was aligned with the core of that student-centered work. So, when Dr. Peterson came in the summer, she began plowing ahead. She used a metaphor that I really like. She said, "Dr. Blake came in and cleared the land and now we have to decide what we are going to construct on that land."

Summary

No one can accurately predict how quickly leaders can influence student learning, but strong educational leaders are known for their impact on school culture. Blake's challenges were formidable. She had to confront deep-rooted, inequitable practices that had become situated in the district's culture. As an outsider, she recognized a repeated pattern of underserving children of color which had unfavorably put the district at the top of North Carolina's list for having one of the largest achievement gaps in the state. The institutionalized culture, accepted norms, and mindsets called for a shift in mindset. Dr. Blake's work set that change in motion with the implementation of a strategic planning process that created a sense of direction and outlined measurable goals.

Additionally, she used this tried-and-true tool to shape the conversation and create change during the succession, transition, and incorporation phases of her administration. It proved useful for establishing relationships, gaining a solid understanding of district

challenges, and assisted with establishing expectation that set the stage for change. By all accounts, current district indicators suggest that her efforts were not in vain, even in a short period of time she served.

Dr. Blake left ECSD with a reputation for altering the way the district served students. She had challenged the status quo and transformed the conversations around student achievement and equity that shed light on uncomfortable issues and uncovered uncomfortable realities. All interviewees agreed that the conversations served as an awakening for the district and opened the door for change to begin.

Chapter VI follows with a summary of the qualitative study, discussion and findings as well as responses to the four research questions that drove the study. The research question responses will be backed by concrete examples from the themes regarding how strategy planning processes were used to facilitate the succession and transition stages of new leadership. Implications and recommendations will be shared to benefit superintendents in similar situations who may struggle to establish new administration upon arrival to a new position.

CHAPTER VI

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore how public school superintendents might begin a new leadership role, learn about and understand district and organizational challenges, and establish trust and collaborative relationships with school community stakeholders from the beginning of their administration. Specifically, the study examined how the strategic planning process can serve incoming superintendents transitioning into a new school district. The acquisition of knowledge and relationship building are byproducts of the process of strategic planning when implemented upon leadership transition.

Examining leadership succession and transition around the implementation of a strategic planning process involved interpretivist, semi-structured interviews conducted in two North Carolina school districts that had undergone similar leadership change processes. The districts were selected for the study because each had newly-appointed superintendents who employed the strategic planning process upon arrival. A total of nineteen individuals were interviewed, including nine people from each school district as well as the consultant who facilitated the process. Participating individuals, other than the superintendent and consultant, met the following criteria: (a) each held positions of

leadership prior to the predecessor's departure; (b) each experienced the succession and transition process; (c) and each were participants on the strategic planning committee. Participants consisted of school board members, central support staff, and principals. The accounts of past events and the evolution of leadership were unique to each district. Accounts were based on data collected from participant interviews, online media reports from local news outlets, and district website information.

Discussions and Findings

The intent of this section is to consider larger interpretations and personal reflections that came about from the study and correlated with the conceptual framework. The following themes have been distilled from codes and categories that emerged from the research. These themes are expressed in a way to inform the reader of the usefulness of implementing a strategic planning process during the succession phase of leadership. Twelve categories arising from the coding process were resynthesized in order to provide key ideas from what I learned about the strategic planning process and superintendent succession. Themes from this study included:

- Organizational Culture's Influence on the Incoming Superintendent Administration
- Strategic Leadership: Leadership for Change
- Strategic Plan Processes and Perceptions

The following articulations of these themes are correlated with the data and literature review.

Organizational Culture's Influence on the Incoming Superintendent Administration

Respondents demonstrated their beliefs that the organizations' cultures largely contributed to and influenced the incoming superintendents' ability to become established and build their administrations. According to Schein, (2010) culture is created, in part, by an organization's leader, which not only shapes an organization and its members but also impacts all connected stakeholders. Situational elements contribute to the evolution of culture, which arises from the traits of the leader, the organization's history, available resources, and relationship between the leader and followers (Hollander & Offermann, 1990).

The following categories are included within this theme: organizational culture, bureaucratic structures of power, prior leadership, board expectations for new leadership, external environment as influences on the internal environment, and sociocultural influences impacting perceptions of trust. Appendix C provides the codes and categories that yielded this theme.

THEME: ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE'S INFLUENCE ON INCOMING SUPERINTENDENT	
CATEGORY	Organizational Culture
CODE	toxic good ole-boys stagnant insincere perception versus reality as long as we appeared great, we were great
CATEGORY	Bureaucratic Structures of Power
CODE	weak city-school partnership hindered progress their actions sent clear messages school performance was a reflection of disjointed initiatives people were constantly trying to undermine each other equity gaps are not just a school system problem, it's a city and county problem
CATEGORY	Prior Leadership
CODE	why things are the way they are unhealthy relationships wanted to maintain status quo glossed over negative information with the board decisions led to turmoil and suspicion
CATEGORY	Board Expectations for New Leadership
CODE	building relationships transparent communication addressing achievement gap
CATEGORY	External Environment as Influences on Internal Environment
CODE	district was over capacity out of district families were taking in-district spots decreases in student enrollment led to decreases in funding
CATEGORY	Sociocultural Influences Impacting Perceptions of Trust
CODE	Parents felt deceived inequities exist in the city and community community is very parochial black community doesn't trust

Figure 5. Theme: Organizational Culture's Influence on Incoming Superintendent

Organizational Culture

This study defined an organization's culture by the people and the relationships they have with each other. It is an intricate framework in which members follow shared expectations and processes. The elements of an organization's culture evolve over time, events, and are shaped by leadership. They are also reliably consistent and hard to change (Hollander & Offerman, 1990; Schein, 1992, 2010).

The study revealed participant perceptions of unhealthy patterns of accepted norms and behaviors that were reflective of each district's culture. Relationships, power, and authority became prominent and contentious points that negatively impacted teaching and learning, which are the core purposes of education.

Bureaucratic structures of power. Political authority and power influenced district structures and contributed to the overall character of the organizations. Participants referenced internal and external environments as impactful to each organization's culture, which was reflected in multiple levels of controls functioning inside and outside of the school systems. It revealed ways in which power is used by various authority figures and the relationships existing between the systems (Hollander & Offerman, 1990; Schein, 1992, 2010).

The study's data reveals internal structures, such as the school board and district administration, and external structures, such as the county and city elected officials influence the work and culture of the school district. As a result of internal and external influences and disjointed relationships, the school districts' ability to address important educational goals like school performance and equity was negatively impacted.

Prior leadership. The history of an organization is highlighted by important events, such as a merger between city and county school systems, achievement awards, or strategic changes in leadership or organizational structures. These pivotal events give shape to identity and the collective perceptions of its members. Alverson (2002) asserts that leadership calls for "careful consideration of the social context in which processes of leadership take place" (p. 94). Previous leadership made key decisions that shaped their

districts' identities, cultures, and organizational outcomes that were inherited by the incoming superintendents and was credited for the status of the current situation of both districts. Viewed chronologically, the study showed connections regarding the reasons behind previous leadership decisions, revealing the intersection of past and present events that led to the creation of each district's story.

Board expectations for new leadership. Remarks regarding prior leadership allowed me to draw connections between past events and board expectations for the incoming superintendents. Dr. Miller of Central County School District and Dr. Blake of East City School District were each expected to improve district cultures that were facing crisis and failing in key areas of performance. Expectations calling for the building and bridging of relationships, establishing transparent communications, and addressing achievement gaps were discussed in their job interviews and mandated upon hire. These mandates directly correlated with prior leadership's perceived failures and limitations.

External environment as influences on internal environment. Organizations are affected by economic and sociocultural influences. Economic trends impact the availability and worth of an organization's resources while social and cultural elements are seen in the inherent values of cultural and ethnic groups present within communities served by the districts (Lusthaus, Adrien & Anderson, 1999). Each organization's demographic trends correlated to the growth or stagnation of the surrounding communities. Additionally, the state of their economies also contributed to eligibility for and disbursements of federal, state, and local funding. While one district was concerned with increased student enrollment and overcrowding, the other district was troubled by a

decline in the county's population, diminishing student numbers, and the controversial issue of closing under-capacity schools.

Sociocultural influences impacted the perception of trust. Interviews revealed that community members and families often felt the school systems lacked transparency. Opinions such as these created barriers for the superintendents who were working to renew trust and reestablish relationships between the school district and community stakeholders.

Summary

The theme, Organizational Culture's Influence on Incoming Superintendent, speaks to the powerful dynamics that were inherited by Drs. Miller and Blake. They each arrived with the expectation to transform practices and create change. In order to address their challenges, it was imperative that they understand the uniqueness of the communities and school districts they were to serve, which was a key reason the strategic planning process was employed during transition into their new role.

A common thread throughout the research is the perception that each district's organizational culture was a unifying force that defined commonly held values and behaviors exhibited by the members. Bureaucratic structures of power, prior leadership, board expectations, as well as internal and external dynamics were influential factors associated to each district's particular cultural context. All participants interviewed for this study cited examples in which culture unified and divided its people. While these elements contributed to the challenges encountered by the incoming superintendents'

transitions, the strategic planning process gave the new leaders a greater perspective and insight regarding the reasons for how the cultures had evolved.

Schein maintains, “one of the decisive functions of leadership is the creation, the management, and sometimes even the destruction of culture” (1992, p. 5). The challenges each superintendent confronted on their journey for creating change involved creating new processes, sustaining practices that worked, and eliminating areas that impeded progress toward organizational goals.

Strategic Leadership: Leadership for Change

The superintendent successions were marked by explicit board expectations for change that required dramatic and assertive leadership. Fullan discusses the complexities of leadership when change is required. He states, “leading in a culture of change entails unlocking the mysteries of living organizations, with emphasis placed on understanding and insight rather than on mere action steps” (Fullan, 2014, p. 58). Urgent circumstances such as the ones confronted by Miller and Blake required them to tap into different elements of their leadership styles. Similarly, Kotter (2008) emphasized the first step in creating change is by establishing a sense of urgency. Doing so enables members within an organization to comprehend the great need for change. Appendix C the codes and categories that produced this theme.

THEME: STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE	
CATEGORY	Leadership Traits
CODE	unaware of hidden landmines
	lack of personal alliances allowed for quick changes to be made
	viewed as stranger to the community
	able to see things with a fresh perspective
	strategic thinkers at the 50,000 foot level
	effective at identifying and reaching shared goals
	focused sense of urgency
	arrived with a vision for what needed to be changed in order to better serve children
	constantly pushed for innovation
	quick execution of ideas
	impatient
	too much change implemented too fast
	wanting quick wins
	had no problem making the call
	innovative thinking
CATEGORY	Developing Relationships
CODE	charismatic
	compassionate with children
	sociable
	speak extemporaneously
	measured
	forthright
	door always open
	engaging personality
	never met a stranger
	bridge builder

Figure 6. Theme: Strategic Leadership: Leadership for Change

Leadership Traits

Drs. Miller and Blake shared similar leadership traits as shown by participant comments. They were both considered outsiders to the districts and communities in that they were not privy to local secrets or past behaviors which created a lack of awareness during pivotal decision-making situations. On the other hand, this attribute was perceived as a key factor that enabled each leader to see problems from a fresh perspective, giving them the capacity to step back from a problem and see the big picture.

Often leaders become paralyzed when faced with making tough calls and the myriad of challenges associated with being superintendent. However, that was not the

case with these strong women who were regarded as being very decisive in nature, often making impulsive decisions without having the necessary insight required to adequately weigh potential consequences. While both positive and negative outcomes were associated with their leadership styles, interviewees considered their approach as progressive and beneficial to moving the district forward with a sense of urgency. Many credited their style as an essential component for setting the stage for change within districts that had become stagnant and toxic. Others however viewed their decision-making processes as irresponsible and often disrespectful to the individuals who were impacted, even when decisions were made with the best intentions.

Developing Relationships

According to Fullan (2014), the role of the leader “is to ensure that the organization develops relationships that help produce desirable results” (p. 77). Participant responses underscored this sentiment. It was clear from the interviews that each superintendent had a distinctive style for building relationships and cultivating partnerships with key stakeholders. Both leaders were portrayed as having the unique and intangible ability to influence others in order to achieve their visions for transformation. Driven by convictions and commitment to creating change, one superintendent capitalized on charm and persuasiveness while the other was characterized as passionate in her beliefs and intellectual in her approach to motivating and inspiring others. This charismatic trait enabled them to build interpersonal relationships, navigate problems, and establish trust.

Summary

The theme, Strategic Leadership: Leadership for Change, highlighted the intersection of two key elements of leadership, personality traits and relationship-building capacity. Research correlating individual personality traits with successful leadership revealed the dominance (assertiveness and control), sociability (engagement and relationship building), and locus of control (self-esteem and belief in one's self) as key predictors of leadership effectiveness (Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt, 2002). While Drs. Miller and Blake were described as possessing these qualities, they were related to both positive and negative events.

Findings from this study, supported by participant interviews and news articles, indicate that these leadership traits were evidenced by each superintendent's bold decisions, unwavering belief in convictions, and the relationships they established that enabled them to push their agendas forward. Miller's leadership traits enabled her to bridge long-standing divisions around consolidating district facilities. She is recognized for bringing resolution to a decades-old impasse in order for construction of a new central office building to occur. To Blake's credit, she was able to bring an awareness and sense of urgency to inequitable practices that had become entrenched within the district. Her drive to provide an equitable education for all the district's children enabled her to establish a common language and new understanding around the term *equity*. While she encountered resistance, she was able to lay the groundwork for change needed to steer the district in a more positive direction.

This research also highlighted leadership blind spots that hindered their successes. Participants indicated behaviors that included: being insensitive; playing favorites; making quick decisions without weighing all the facts; and ineffective communication. These blind spots weakened their ability to achieve district goals. In Miller's case, she overlooked the need to have full buy-in from staff before implementing district-wide initiatives. For Blake, she underestimated the negative reaction and resistance from parents, school, and community members who resented the changes she was making to school leadership structures as well as institutionalized district programs.

Strategic Planning and Perceptions

To come full circle with Kotter's (2008) view that a sense of urgency is required in order to create change, Fullan underscores the importance of having a strategy to address the change. He states, "a crisis without a strategy is a recipe for random action and growing frustration" (Fullan, 2014, p. 23). The incoming superintendents were each tasked by their school boards to tackle prioritized and pressing issues upon arrival. This sense of urgency aided in starting the strategic planning processes undertaken by the districts. Appendix C provides the codes and categories that formed this theme.

THEME: STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PERCEPTIONS	
CATEGORY	Strategic Planning Process
CODE	defined mission, vision, and purpose provided clarity and direction brought consensus cleared barriers for change
CATEGORY	Defining Direction, Priorities, and Shared Values
CODE	shared beliefs and purpose set the direction everyone aligned around literacy established common goals and objectives that incorporated issues of equity
CATEGORY	Perceptions of the Process
	collaborative interactive enlightening exercises school and community involvement authentic reflective innovative creative importance of maintaining focus on the strategic mission
CATEGORY	Outcomes and Impact
	process led to compromise rebranding of perceptions established common language created a new awareness around issues of equity

Figure 7. Theme: Strategic Planning and Perceptions

Defining Direction, Priorities, and Shared Values

Once the planning teams were established and meetings scheduled, the first steps were to evaluate existing or construct new organizational statements regarding mission, vision, and values. Organizations that endure over time are aligned around the fundamental reason for their existence (Drucker, 1993; Collins, 2001; Collins & Porras, 1997). These are the unchanging, core values of an organization. Alignment reinforces an organization's core values and purpose. It also enables progress toward continuous improvement. To conceptualize this point, Collins and Porras (1997) coined the phrase "preserve the core yet stimulate progress" (p. 80).

Both districts identified the process of teaching and learning as central to their purpose. This core value was reflected in their mission statements. The vision statements defined district aspirations, while the values statements exemplified guiding principles and beliefs. These statements formed the framework for the strategic planning process enabling stakeholders to explore questions that called for reflection on the past and envisioning where they want to be in the future. Participants indicated the process resulted in a strong consensus among district stakeholders that was imperative for change to occur.

Perceptions of the Process

All participants interviewed spoke about the strategic planning process in positive terms, which spanned from a five to six month timeframe where goals and performance indicators were developed from on-going conversations. Participants recalled being encouraged to think strategically and define how they were going to contribute to the achievement of the vision. Purposeful starter questions around goals and strategies brought about authentic and reflective conversations. From these discussions, team members arrived at innovative solutions to address identified areas of need.

A timeline was developed for achieving objectives outlined in the plan's framework. Several participants underscored the importance of making the strategic plan a living document and expressed concern that the district would lose momentum if the process was not revisited on a regular basis or if there was a change in leadership. At the time of this research, both districts had sustained focus on their strategic plans' goals and priorities by scheduling periodic evaluations throughout the year.

Outcomes and Impact

Participants credited both superintendents for establishing a process that allowed them to become acclimated to the district while also identifying, prioritizing, and addressing areas of needs. Compromise and bridge building came out of each district's facilitation of the strategic planning process. It also created a new awareness of overarching challenges. As a result, district approaches to procedures, operations, and instruction were altered for how schools should serve children.

Summary

With pressing expectations for changing district trajectories, the incoming superintendents approached their new positions by implementing a formalized, strategic planning process. Neither district had a living strategic plan that defined purpose, shared beliefs, and vision. Each leader wanted to build an organizational strategy that would serve as a roadmap for continuous improvement. As reflected from this theme, Strategic Planning and Perceptions, the organized implementation and process engaged stakeholders from all levels of the school and community to drive conversations in an effort to create consensus around prioritized goals and district direction.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided my study with the consultant, school, and district administrators of Central County School District and East City School District. The intent of this section is to consider larger observations and personal reflections as a result of the research and in relation to the research questions, framework, and emerging themes.

1. What are specific challenges faced by incoming superintendents upon entry and transition into an established organization?
2. How do school superintendents/administration regard their experiences with the strategic planning process as a vehicle to introduce organizational change and expectations?
3. How did the unique characteristics of the district impact the facilitation and success of the goals set forth from the strategic plan?
4. What are specific examples of change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan? How have the changes been perceived?

Question One

What are specific challenges faced by incoming superintendents upon entry and transition into an established organization? The incoming leaders' personal perspectives on change, perceptions of district culture, and board expectations all played a part in their arrival experiences. Correlating with the theme of *Organizational Culture's Influence on Incoming Superintendents*, the following areas were revealed as essential to the superintendents' experiences.

Bureaucratic structures of power. In his analysis of how leadership and culture are interrelated, Schein (2010) argues that "1) leaders as entrepreneurs are the main architects of culture, 2) that after cultures are formed, they influence what kind of leadership is possible, and 3) that if elements of the culture become dysfunctional, leadership can and must do something to speed up culture change." (p. xi). Reviews of each district's past administrations provide a backdrop for understanding the bureaucratic

culture inherited by the incoming superintendents. Research of past events portrayed dysfunction between district and governmental authorities, demonstrating how political divisions can remove focus from the core purpose of education.

The incoming superintendents implemented the strategic plan in order to set a course for change. In doing so, they were confronted by the bureaucratic structures that had evolved over time. The data revealed poor relational undercurrents as a common concern. Multiple levels of bureaucracy existed within the cultures that included district leadership, school board dynamics, city and county political influences, community perceptions, and socioeconomic dynamics. Within each of these levels there were factions and subcultures. According to Schein (2010) an organization's subculture is representative of the overall organization, however they are "often based on a similarity of educational background in the members, a shared task, and/or a similarity of organizational experience" (p. 55). The Board of Education is an example of an organizational subculture. Schein (2010) contends that a lack of alignment between subcultures leads to bureaucratic dysfunction and personality conflicts among stakeholders.

Prior leadership. To understand the depth of disorder, it is important to consider prior administrations. Progress and development of both districts had been moving in the wrong direction. Both district predecessors came into the superintendency as insiders with preconceived notions and personal alliances that were used to build a close network of selected leaders with whom they trusted and delegated authority. Over the course of prior leadership, the districts had become a less centralized system of schools rather than

a centralized, school system. Often it is the case that decentralized organizations have increased autonomy without a system of checks and balances which can negatively impact consistency of processes and procedures (Schein, 2010). Additionally, Moe (1989) argues that bureaucratic structures are connected to “efficiency and effectiveness . . . and have important consequences for the content and direction of policy” (p. 268).

Like a frog in a pot of water that slowly comes to a rolling boil, neither predecessor was able to see what was happening within their organizations. By the time Drs. Miller and Blake arrived, the culture and leadership structures were well established. According to Barker (2006) change is more difficult to produce and sustain when an organization’s culture has matured and relationships become established. Each district was stagnant and rife with turf wars between authorities that often viewed each other more as competitors than partners in pursuit of educational excellence. The changes brought to CCSD and ECSD constituted a major shift of strategic direction and were not embraced by everyone. Participants such as Tommie Sessions and Riley Pompeo of CCSD and Lynn Wall of ECSD discussed the fast pace of change, while others such as Logan Maxwell of ECSD recalled fond memories of the previous superintendent’s leadership and an idealized past.

The new brand of leadership brought by Miller and Blake, as well as their drive for fast change, created disruption and instances of resistance. However, both superintendents perceived this as a positive reaction to change and, based past leadership experiences, felt prepared for the reaction.

Board expectations for new leadership: CCSD. Dr. Miller's primary challenges centered around bridging relationships that had long been divided and caused significant disruption for the school system as well as the county's economic progress as a whole. At the time of Miller's arrival, the CCSD school and community were in full upheaval with deep seated animosity throughout. Dr. Miller is credited for bringing the community together around a 24-year dispute over the building of a school district central office, which had long operated from five separate locations. As each year came and went, there was new hope that the county commissioners would approve funding for a new building that would consolidate these support sites. As a result, maintenance and upkeep for these facilities were minimal. With over two decades of failed attempts at resolution, the district support facilities were in deplorable conditions and widely considered an embarrassment.

Coinciding with Miller's transition into the district, the district and county commissioners began mediation proceedings, which resulted in an initial funding agreement for construction of the building. The new central office was ready for occupancy two and half years later. Dr. Miller underscored the construction of the new building as a significant point in her tenure with the district.

Miller also inherited a state-designation as a *District of Low Performance*. This meant she had to address student achievement and school performance at the same time she was working to bridge bureaucratic relationships across the spectrum of the community. She confronted this challenge by instituting one of the state's largest digital conversions. It was a massive undertaking that involved an overhaul of the district's

network infrastructure, creation of a digital curriculum, and deployment of mobile, take-home devices for the district's students and staff.

Board expectations for new leadership: ECSD. It is difficult to discuss the challenges Dr. Blake faced without mentioning the inequalities that had become institutionalized within the system. ECSD was near the bottom in education equality for children of color when compared to other school districts across the state. Lewis and Diamond (2015, p. 3) use the term *racial achievement gap* to describe the “disparities in test scores, grade point averages, and/or high school and college completion rates” between white students and children of color. Racial, socioeconomic, and gender disparities in academic performance and educational attainment was situated in ECSD's educational system. These glaring disparities prompted a call for change. Blake used the strategic planning process as a tool for starting conversations around equity and establishing agreed upon goals for reform.

The district has a long history of perpetuating racial discrimination and even though there was a concerted effort to address institutionalized inequalities in 2004 and 2012, little headway was made. Michelle Harris explained how student tracking was an imbedded practice throughout the district and used as an integral component of the Academically Intellectually Gifted (AIG) identification process, stating:

The identification began as early as kindergarten with a program called AIG nurturing but was disproportionate in selection. For instance, the district's population of non-white students is 45%; however, less than 10% of our non-white students are identified as AIG.

Changing processes related to tracking was one of Dr. Blake's top priorities and greatest challenges. She began conversations through the strategic planning process in order to gain consensus around shifting structures from how the program had historically been managed. The strategic planning discussions led to the proposal for utilizing a *push-in* method for nurturing rather than the traditional method of pulling identified kids out for services. This meant that the AIG specialist went into the class and all the kids received nurturing. The negative reaction from parents who had children receiving the *pull-out* services was swift and dramatic. The paradox was that young children were being identified, tracked, and placed in the district's AIG program based primarily on the color of their skin and without fidelity of assessment, and parents were fighting to keep it that way. It was apparent that ECSD had embedded biases within its instructional processes that provided advantages for some children while others were marginalized and disadvantaged.

Organizational culture. Interviewed participants perceived the district cultures as a predominate factor preventing productive change. Their personal perspectives on district leadership, their perceptions of district culture, and the contributing factors that created that culture all played a part in their understanding of how the districts had evolved to where they were as a whole. While most participants recognized the need for change and expressed feelings of gratification for creating a consistent district direction through the strategic planning process, others felt the swift changes created unnecessary disruption.

As outsiders, the incoming superintendents did not share the same history as the other participants in the study. From their perspective, change was imperative and each moved quickly with implementation, starting with a strategic planning process. Fullan (2003) writes about the dilemma of creating fundamental change and acknowledges that change requires a balance, saying “chaos or drift is bad, corrective order is good, but pushing the limits of order backfires” (p. 66). As it happened, the implementation of the strategic planning process for both districts coincided with the reorganization of administrative and departmental structures upon the arrival of each superintendent. This factor was perceived as an impediment, creating defiance and receptivity to change.

Summary. Specific challenges faced by the incoming superintendents upon entry and transition into their established organizations included meeting board expectations, addressing immediate areas of need, and establishing a new administration with new expectations and processes. The process was an avenue that assisted with acquiring organizational knowledge and creating a collective vision, establishing shared beliefs, and fostering relationships. More importantly, this research question underscores the importance of a leader thoroughly learning the real and often hidden issues of a district.

Although the strategic planning process supported the superintendents’ acclimation to their districts, a core challenge for both was to implement change through a more balanced approach, especially in areas that were not seen as urgent. While there were defined priorities that required immediate attention, both leaders would have benefited from gaining greater acceptance and buy-in before instituting deep changes. Lynn Wall observed the importance of avoiding blind spot decision-making:

It's important for any leader to recognize the hidden landmines and warning signs of problems because it hinders their ability to make the right calls and decisions for the district.

Question Two

How do school superintendents/administration regard their experiences with the strategic planning process as a vehicle to introduce organizational change and expectations? The implementation of the strategic planning process not only served as a way to learn about the organizations into which the superintendents had been hired, but it was also a way to introduce change and new expectations. The school superintendents, consultant, and administrative team members personal perceptions regarding their overall experiences with the strategic planning process and resulting outcomes are aligned with the themes of *Strategic Leadership: Leadership for Change* and *Strategic Planning and Perceptions*.

Strategic Leadership: Leadership for Change

Developing relationships. Drs. Miller and Blake used the process as a tool and credited it for key benefits such as: getting to know personnel and key community stakeholders; setting expectations for the new administration; and most importantly, building relational trust. The consultant, Dr. Robert Brooks, who facilitated both district strategic planning processes, reflected on how the superintendents used the it to map out an entry plan into the district as well as facilitate change. Crediting the leaders for having the forethought to use it for multiple purposes, he said it allowed them to take part in strategic conversations about district improvement and student achievement while simultaneously getting to know and building relationships with district stakeholders.

Likewise, interviewed participants such as Michelle Harris of ECSD offered that the process enabled the district personnel and community members an opportunity to learn more about their new superintendent; thereby underscoring the relational benefits of implementing this type of strategic planning process upon entry and transition into a new leadership position.

Superintendent / school board relations. Interviews with participants exposed how relationships between the superintendent and school board impact the district in both positive and negative ways. One of the most challenging aspects noted by the superintendents was managing relationships with school board members who were unaware of the responsibilities and limitations of their role or who chose to exercise power in a divisive way. Reinforcing this perspective, Danzberger's (1994) research asserted that school boards often seem dysfunctional because individual board members don't possess a clear understanding of the board's role and responsibilities or how to go about setting policy for school systems.

Drs. Miller and Blake believed the superintendent / school board relationship should be seen as a partnership in which mutual understanding and collaboration are present in order to accomplish agreed upon goals. They credited the strategic planning process as instrumental in helping to establish common grounds between the superintendent and members of the board by providing a safe forum for open discussions about district priorities and goals. An important aspect of developing positive relationships were their ongoing efforts for creating board alignment around district goals through collaborative experiences. Examples cited by the superintendents included: board

retreats, which provided opportunities for engagement with other district school boards; informational sessions; exposure to nationally recognized thought leaders; and building interpersonal connections with each other. Drs. Miller and Blake felt these shared experiences made a positive difference in their relationships with school board members; however, they also recognized the disruption that school board elections can have on established, working dynamics. As Kowalski (2005) maintained, “one of the most unsettling realities is that one board election may alter a superintendent’s job security” (p. 135). Both Miller and Blake cited instances where board dynamics were negatively impacted by a change in the school board membership as a result of the November election cycle.

Strategic Planning Process: Vehicle for New Administration Expectations

Like maps, the strategic planning process can assist with assessing the organizational landscape while providing tools for navigating its areas. As Bolman and Deal (2017) point out:

Every tool has distinctive strengths and limitations. The right tool makes a job easier; the wrong one gets in the way. . . Managers who master the hammer and expect all problems to behave like nails find life at work confusing and frustrating. The wise manager, like a skilled carpenter, wants at hand a diverse collection of high-quality implements . . . Only experience and practice foster the skill and wisdom to take stock of a situation and use suitable tools with confidence and skill. (p. 15)

The difference between “leaders that succeed at driving collaboration and innovation versus those that fail, is their ability to grasp complexity to improve performance across a range of tasks” (Bolman and Deal, 2017, p. 15). The newly hired

superintendents used the strategic planning tool in order to reframe leadership in the districts they were hired to oversee. Implementing the process during the phases of succession aided them in becoming acclimated to the districts and created awareness for organizational processes they would not have had otherwise. Both superintendents agreed that their entry into the district was eased by the facilitation of a strategic planning process.

Strategic planning process and perceptions. Both districts used similar approaches for organizing the strategic planning meetings by targeting a cross section of the school community that included board members, central support staff, principals, teachers, and students. The superintendents discussed an appreciation for the strategic planning process, saying it helped their personal leadership and decision-making styles. Both leaders have a reputation for being strong-willed and convicted in their beliefs about the teaching and learning process and there were instances where they were challenged to think differently. The experiences reinforced the opinion that change requires collaboration and relationships.

Strategic plan perceptions. Strategic planning is an organized approach to establishing a set of processes in order to achieve desired outcomes based on the organization's beliefs, values, and core purpose (Bryson, 1988; Bryson & Alston, 2011). The approach allows leaders to strategically manage challenges through defining where it wants to be while effectively managing change through action. The strategic planning processes used by Dr. Miller and Dr. Blake were highly formalized in format and purposefully intended to shape conversations in order to facilitate change.

Both district planning processes incorporated input from community stakeholders that came in the form of survey responses, meetings, public forums, and broadcast across a variety of mediums. Participants felt it supported a team mindset and encouraged collaboration with key, invested stakeholders. By engaging a range of stakeholders with different perspectives on the process, the superintendents built both internal and external acceptance for the district's plan and priorities. The culminating vision, mission, goals, and shared beliefs arose from the process that was developed through collaboration. Others emphasized the importance of using the district plan in order drive change and make decisions. Participants from both districts credited the process for providing direction and momentum needed for change, as well as creating consensus around issues that had been troubling the districts for many years and served as an apparatus for achieving desired outcomes.

It was noteworthy that every participant interviewed from ECSD was able to recall the vision and mission and motto, which was impressive and spoke to its simplicity. Each participant talked about the term *Excellence with Equity* and the outcomes that grew from focusing on the whole child. Additionally, most pointed to the strategic plan's early childhood focus area as a driving force behind changes in the preschool program. Dr. Blake approached these conversations as if it were an awareness campaign that served as an impetus for the strategic plan.

Participants from both districts cited examples in which they would connect specific strategic plan goals to change initiatives, decisions, or proposals to the board. Both Miller and Blake made a concerted effort to align all major decisions to the goals

outlined in the strategic plan. Doing so provided rationale for decision-making and financial expenditures, which was especially helpful when there was board skepticism in a plan being proposed.

Summary. All participants interviewed for this study from both districts maintained a positive view of their experiences with the strategic planning process and regarded it as a vehicle to introduce organizational change and expectations. School and district administrators, board members, and the consultant credited the process for bringing consensus around many divisive issues. The consultant felt his role as facilitator allowed the superintendents to be part of the conversations rather than leader of them. The district and school administrators discussed the benefits of collaboration and creating shared priorities. Board members, Mary Gardner and Lee Davis saw it as an approach to establish agreement around priorities for change. The superintendents saw the process as a way to learn and understand the organizations they were to lead while addressing urgent priorities as outlined by the board.

Ciampa and Dotlich (2015) stressed the significance of beginning a new administrative tenure with a basis of understanding for organizational operations, saying:

To achieve early wins, the new leader must learn how the company operates day to day as it responds to changes of the ecosystem in which it exists...the earlier the new leader can grasp where opportunities lie, the better the chance for a winning transition. (p. 97)

Casey Sanders, CCSD board member viewed the strategic planning process as an approach that offered the Dr. Miller valuable insight into core processes of the school's organization. Drs. Miller and Blake recognized that much of the knowledge they gained

from the process would have taken them months to learn had they not implemented the strategic plan upon arrival and transition into the position.

Question Three

How did the unique characteristics of the district impact the facilitation and success of the goals set forth from the strategic plan? Perceptions of the school superintendents, consultant, and administrative team members regarding their districts and the resulting outcomes of the strategic plan are aligned with the three themes of *Organizational Culture's Influence on Incoming Superintendent, Strategic Leadership: Leadership for Change* and *Strategic Planning and Perceptions*.

Organizational culture. Each district possessed unique characteristics that were created by previous leadership, historical events, accepted norms, customs, and traditions. Embedded cultures greatly influenced the strategic planning process and its implementation and outcomes. As consultant and former superintendent with a well-rounded perspective of leadership, Dr. Brooks made the distinction that both superintendents had been tasked with a unique set of substantial burdens, not often faced by other incoming superintendents. The personal accounts and viewpoints gained from this study shed light upon the fact that both superintendents faced difficult situations left over from previous leadership. Using tools acquired from prior leadership experiences, including the strategic planning process, helped them work through such barriers.

One significantly similar challenge encountered by Miller and Blake was the sense of complacency that had set in among stakeholders. Both superintendents had inherited a culture that was ingrained and embedded in “the way we've always done it,

and what's wrong with the way we've always done it" mindset. They worked to change this perception through building relationships, establishing district priorities, and opening lines of communication.

CCSD: Bureaucratic structures of power. Dr. Miller's overarching challenge came from divisive bureaucracies that left scars and old wounds that had never healed. The county's economy had been stagnant from years of conflict-ridden and partisan leadership as well as poor fiscal spending decisions by elected government officials. Adding to the situation were the unresolved issues of a new central office. All board members interviewed for this study recognized the difficult dynamics inherited by Dr. Miller but they also credited her seasoned background as a factor enabling successful district transformation. Negative undercurrents and animosity were constant reminders of the discord within the community. Participants considered the conflict as an element that hindered the process of teaching and learning and correlated it to the district's low performance.

ECSD: Sociocultural influences impacting perceptions of trust. Addressing issues of equity and racial disparities were the dominating challenges confronting Dr. Blake. Adding to that challenge was the fact that Blake is a black female who was leading a district that had historically marginalized children of color. All participants interviewed from ECSD acknowledged ways in which Dr. Blake was personally vested in creating learning environments that supported *all* children rather than a subset of children. In spite of her commitment to an equitable education for *all* children, Blake confronted strong resistance from community members at both ends of the spectrum.

Supported by participant comments, the community's more privilege and outspoken members viewed her intentions as a zero-sum game that removed resources from their children in order to give to others. She also experienced opposition from the black community at the other end of the continuum. Perceptions formed over time from a history of lost faith and distrust had shaped their relationship with the area's educational and community leaders. For many from the black community, Dr. Blake was seen as just another politician making empty promises.

Organizational culture. Both districts were operating inconsistently from school to school. The learning organizations were disconnected and lacked uniformity. There wasn't a clear message or purpose for either district, which added to the extraordinary demands of their positions. Participants from both districts discussed the concepts and differences between operating in a "system of schools" rather than a "school system". Interviewees recounted previous leadership as lacking a unified message and being inconsistent with organizational operations. According to Senge (1998, p. 450), when leading organizations fail to implement strategic direction, they often fall into a dangerous trap by operating from "crisis to crisis . . . eventually, the worldview of the people becomes dominated by events and reactivity, especially those who are deeply committed, become burned out. Eventually cynicism comes to pervade the organization." This characterization can be used to describe the districts identified in this study during the pre-arrival stage of transition.

When the incoming superintendents were hired, participants from both districts expressed an eagerness for transformational change. The districts were similar in that

prior events had made the boards cognizant of the fact that meaningful change was needed. This realization prompted the search for superintendents who could lead that level of change. At the time, board members who participated in this study discussed the impact of poor leadership. They recognized it as a contributing factor that led to a stagnation of the educational processes and the low morale of staff and students.

For these reasons, the facilitation of the strategic plan and resulting goals were met with great enthusiasm and support. Participants discussed how the process allowed them to gain a perspective about the educational and community culture that they would not have otherwise learned. The process helped create awareness by changing the conversation and making people think differently. It allowed the districts to take meaningful steps in the right direction.

Summary. Each district's unique characteristics impacted the facilitation and success of the goals set forth from the strategic plan in both positive and negative ways. The facilitation of the strategic planning process was instrumental in assisting the incoming superintendents as they worked through the daunting challenges they faced upon arrival. Each district's unique qualities, past events, and organizational leadership helped to shape the implementation and identified priorities of the culminating strategic plans. One area of discontent expressed by the administrative participants were the immediate organizational changes that were happening simultaneously with the strategic planning processes. This culminated in the feeling of "too much, too fast" for many of the interviewees.

Question Four

What are specific examples of change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan? How have the changes been perceived? In conducting this study, perceptions of how the plan's goals led to change was a significant and guiding question that aligned with the theme of *Strategic Planning and Perceptions*.

Outcomes and impact. The greatest example of change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan was also one of the greatest challenges. Instituting meaningful transformation at the classroom instructional level was foundational to both district strategic plans. Dr. Miller's mission has been to transform the district's culture of inconsistency by changing perceptions, establishing uniformity in district and school priorities, and focusing on structures of learning that incorporate engagement and collaboration. Dr. Blake laid the groundwork for change by establishing a framework around equity that focused on early childhood literacy and the whole child. She described it as an imperative, beginning-step for changing instructional practices. She also viewed the approach as a significant return-on-investment.

Interviews shed light on how the districts aligned strategic goals in order to shift their instructional practices in effective and meaningful ways. They promoted instructional change by providing opportunities for in-depth, continuous professional development; establishing professional learning communities for collaboration; and exposing educators to thought leaders and consultants in the field.

Both Michelle Harris of ECSD and Pat Tillerson of CCSD talked about seeing a change in traditional, instructional practices. While each district saw growth in student

performance, closing identified achievement gaps remained a concern. As part of the district's transformation, CCSD participant Elaine DeVost described how the classroom setting changed to be more open and collaborative. She also cited successes with effective integration of strategic planning goals through organizational shifts in support of higher-level priorities. Actions defined for each strategy were identified by the process in order to create clear implementation procedures. Successes noted by the participants such as Drew Meyer, Sylvia Smith, and Logan Maxwell of ECSD included an increase in cultural awareness, instructional shifts focused on literacy, and an increase in opportunities for collaboration. They also commented on the positive direction made by creating a common language centered around equity. All ECSD interviewees noted overwhelming strides in the area of early childhood literacy.

While many of the identified goals and priorities were easily met and warmly received, others have been left unfulfilled. Both districts encountered ongoing resistance to change in various forms. Participants attributed the resistance to the fast pace by which the changes occurred. Both districts were in the momentum of change and as a result, mistakes were made and communication lost.

Fullan (2003) writes about large-scale reform and leaders who are faced with cultures that are just going through the motions, which he refers to as *drift*. He describes leaders who want to change direction for their organizations stating, "Leaders facing systems of drift will argue that the system needed a rough wakeup call, and they may be right. But once you get people awake, you have to do something different sooner rather than later" (2003, p. 33). Drs. Miller and Blake acted quickly to institute change and

capture the moment and opportunities that come with being new to a position. This timeframe between pre-arrival and integration of a new leadership position is often referred to as the *honeymoon* period. Appelbaum and Valero (2007) point to the benefits of being productive during the honeymoon period by using it as a time to challenge old ways of thinking and introduce desired changes for the organization.

For CCSD, the dramatic shifts caused by the digital conversion caught school administrators and teachers unprepared, leading some participants to consider the importance of balancing the desire for speedy change with measured approaches and reflection. Schlechty (2011, p. 20) recommended that commitment be gained prior to implementation of change initiatives, explaining “commitment and meaning transform involvement from an act of submission or ritual compliance to one of active involvement and investment of self. Without commitment, there is no engagement, and without meaning, commitment is likely not to occur”.

From the perspective of a district leader in CCSD who was instrumental to the digital transformation process, I personally recognize this as an area that should have garnered more attention. It is my opinion that we rushed through the process of gaining teacher buy-in and commitment. In our haste to implement the digital conversion, we overlooked the importance of taking time to develop the teachers’ understanding of how to use the devices and best practices for classroom management in a digital learning environment. As Harley Haley so aptly stated, “the devil’s in the details”.

For ECSD, proposed changes in school structures included changes to how children were served; grade-level modifications; redistricting initiatives; and

administrative moves. These proposals elicited intense resistance from parents and community members. The uprising created tension at all levels of the school and community. Participants talked about the struggles but emphasized many positive outcomes as a result of the events. Specifically, it highlighted the district's need to ensure equitable, instructional practices for all children. Mary Gardner summarized Blake's impact on the district by saying:

Dr. Blake was not a tremendously popular superintendent but she was the one who started making the changes and people didn't like that. I have a feeling they are going to realize down the road that we really owe this lady an awful lot. We really and truly do. It will make things easier for Dr. Peterson because the groundwork has already been laid.

Summary. Both leaders assumed positions that called for transformational leadership in order to bring about cultural change. Simultaneously, they were expected to deliver early wins. Change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan for CCSD were centered around a focus on literacy through the implementation of a digital conversion. Outcomes connected with the plan included the district purchase and promotion of consistent reading programs, online digital resources for 24/7 learning, and the creation of student collaboration spaces. For ECSD, change related to the strategic plan goals centered around issues of equity in education. Organizational and programming structures were modified to support the plan's mission and vision. Professional development was instituted to create a common language and awareness regarding equitable education for all children.

While participants credited the strategic planning process as being instrumental to creating a consensus around the priorities needed for change, they often expressed discomfort regarding the quick approach for how changes were made. Ciampa (2018) cautions leaders seeking quick change, stating “rushing too quickly toward early wins can deprive the new leader of the insight needed to understand the culture and build relationships” (p. 1). The fast pace by which the changes came often improved conditions but were frequently disruptive and not always associated with stakeholder buy-in or loyalty.

Implications and Recommendations

Research for this study draws a correlation between factors of succession, transition, and organizational performance. Furthermore, the study investigates how the strategic planning process can be used to facilitate leadership transition and serve incoming school superintendents during the beginning phases of a new administration.

Recommendations for Further Research

Three additional areas for further study were identified as a result of this research. They included: 1) strategic planning used exclusively to establish a new administration; 2) insider status versus outsider status experiences implementing strategic plan to establish a new administration; and 3) first year transition and the honeymoon period.

Strategic planning used exclusively to establish a new administration. The original intent of this study was to learn how superintendents coming into a public school district use the strategic planning process for establishing their administration. The districts targeted for this study were rife with problems that required the incoming

superintendents' immediate attention. This dynamic created an additional layer of importance to the role of the strategic planning process in helping them become acclimated. Additional research regarding the use of the strategic planning process as a means for succession and transition not impeded by such great dysfunction would be worthy of exploration.

Insider status versus outsider status. Both superintendents for this study were hired from outside the school district. They were unfamiliar with the community and the historical context that defined the area's identity. The incoming superintendents were not jaded by preconceived opinions of the business-as-usual mindset. They were able to approach change with a clear perspective and make unbiased decisions. Further study investigating how the strategic planning process could benefit insiders hired from within the district would be of interest because they typically come into the position with preconceived perspectives and opinions regarding staff, stakeholders, and organizational operations. How would their experiences be different if implemented by an insider?

First year transition and the honeymoon period. How do superintendents use their time as a resource rather than a constraint? This question surrounds another area of inquiry that would be of interest for further research. The dynamics that happen during the first year of a new administration are often referred to as the *Honeymoon Period*. It is during this time that mistakes are attributed to a learning curve inherent to the position. A study focusing on superintendent experiences in the first year of a new position compared to their experiences in the second, third, and fourth year of tenure would be of interest, especially in the case where a strategic planning process is implemented upon arrival.

Recommendations for Superintendents or Aspiring Superintendents

Superintendents, aspiring superintendents, and educational leaders should consider the merits of utilizing strategic planning as a blueprint for transition. It is a commonly held belief that leaders should strive to set clear expectations and goals within the organizational culture they lead. In many cases, this can be more difficult than it seems, especially for the new, incoming superintendents. Establishing a plan of action is important. The findings from this study may educate current and aspiring superintendents on key strategies that will assist them during their personal leadership transitions.

Recommendations for Higher Education and Leadership Development Programs

Succession and transition of leadership is a major event for a school district that should be carefully planned, managed and supported. Leadership programs should incorporate areas relating to the phases of succession that include pre-arrival and transition such as hiring processes, appointment, induction, and mentoring of new administrators. Supporting this idea, Fullan (2003) argues, “in policies and inquiry, focus as much on the conditions and processes of leadership succession as you do on the preparation and support of new leaders” (p. 68). The dynamics of leadership during succession and transition are often overlooked or under emphasized but possessing an understanding of these processes can prove pivotal in the successes or failures experienced by new leaders. Further investigation of various approaches, strategies, and best practices for creating entry plans during the transition would be an insightful inquiry for school leaders, students, and mentoring program organizations such as the American

Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the North Carolina School Superintendent Association (NCSSA).

Recommendations for School Boards

School systems tend to be large and bureaucratic, which present obstacles to implementing change. The relationship between the superintendent and school board members is one key to overcoming these hurdles. Building relationships takes planning to determine a clear path forward. A critical place to start is at the beginning, during the pre-arrival and transition phase of the newly hired superintendent's tenure. Initiating a strategic planning process as recommended in this study is one approach toward establishing a set of shared beliefs and a unified vision. Further inquiry into other strategies that cultivate mutual trust between school board members and the superintendent should be considered as another aspect of investigation.

The Case for a Culturally Responsive Strategic Planning Process

Leadership succession in the public school superintendency position is often a significant and disruptive event that impacts stakeholders at all levels within the organization and community. While the overarching focus of this research was to examine ways in which the strategic planning process can be used to ensure a smooth transition of leadership, the topics of class, race, and gender were prominently interwoven throughout the stories of the districts participating in this study.

The incoming superintendents had inherited districts rampant with white privilege, power, and racial discrimination. Both counties are known for their Jim Crow-era lynching's and robust Ku Klux Klan presence that reinforced the implementation of

segregation and marginalization during the 1960's civil rights movement. These events and others like it have led to an atmosphere of a disenfranchisement of the black and brown communities.

Mercado (2017) defines institutional racism as “the pattern of social and political systems discriminating against a group of people based on race” (p. 1). Various forms of discrimination and racial biases remain hidden in plain sight and evidenced by established educational structures such as gerrymandered school attendance zones, disproportionate discipline data trends, and gaps in student achievement between children of color and their white classmates. Both superintendents were challenged with developing approaches to address the inequities that had permeated the culture of their organizations.

The goal for both leaders was to make a positive change for all of the students in their districts. By building relationships with key decision-makers and challenging the old guard who opposed construction for a central office, Dr. Miller was able to push through the resistance and bring resolution to a decades-old stalemate. She also made literacy the main focus that was interlaced into every district initiative. Additionally, she led one of the state's largest digital conversions in an attempt to provide *all* students, especially economically disadvantaged children, with the tools necessary for learning in today's digital environment.

Dr. Blake focused on changing structures that had historically kept racial imbalances in place. Using the term *Excellence with Equity* as the district's driving theme, she challenged the status quo by adding early childhood classes in the elementary

schools, changing the AIG nurturing program from a pull-out to a push-in model, reorganizing administrative leadership, and creating new policies to address district growth and overcrowded classes. While Miller and Blake took different approaches to managing the perceived inequities of their respective districts, both attempted to level the playing field for the children in their communities.

The Roles of Race and Gender

I am a white female who was raised in a privileged, nuclear family unit that valued education. My formative years were in the late 60's and early 70's, with high school and college in the 80's. It was a time of deep cultural change in which women were challenging their role in society as the domesticated, obedient, American housewife and mother of children. It was a disorienting time that was full of contradictions. While Oprah Winfrey and Ruth Bader Ginsburg were being recognized for their successes and talents, Tom Jones was singing "She's a Lady" and television shows like *M.A.S.H.* and *The Dukes of Hazzard* were dominating the airways. These dynamics coupled with a culture of excusing misbehaviors by white men of power, especially when compared to transgressions committed by women, have laid the foundation for pervasive sexual harassment and oppression. These cultural and social factors heavily influenced my identity. I understand that powerful men, particularly white, powerful men continue to create barriers, both overt and subtle, that limit possibilities for women, especially ones who aspire to power. As a successful woman who has risen in a male-dominated career, I recognize that is harder for me to be unapologetically competitive and that I am held to

different standards. I brought this lens into my study and it was reflected in my conversations with the participants.

Dr. Miller. Loretta Miller and I share similar backgrounds in that she grew up in the same era with a white, privileged family who believed in the value of education. She rose through the ranks in her career, becoming a public school superintendent in a predominately male-dominated field. She was able to shrewdly navigate the societal environment through determination and confidence. Prior to moving into the superintendency role for CCSD, Miller had spent almost 10 years as superintendent in her previous district, which aided in her knowledge and understanding of the position.

Following another white, female superintendent, Miller's seasoned experience enabled her to leverage her identity and positionality to set a strong leadership tone upon arrival. Negotiating with white men of power, she successfully handled discussions for the construction of a new central office. Her resolve allowed her to push the limits which produced a new approach to education that enabled access to devices and digital resources to all the students of CCSD rather than a select few.

Dr. Blake. As a black female growing up in the south and raised predominantly by her mother and grandmother, Dr. Blake is all too familiar with the imbalances created by systems and structures that promote unequal treatment of people. A successful student, Blake's educational journey and career have been filled with *firsts*: she was the first African American in her school's history to earn a cheerleading scholarship; she was the first African American to graduate with a terminal degree from her university; and she was the first African American female to become superintendent of both ECSD as well as

the district she currently oversees. In an interview with a local paper, Blake recognized the honor of being first in so many categories but admitted to having mixed feelings about it because of the slow pace of advancement for females in our society, specifically black females.

She is very aware of the challenges of being a black female. She credits her successes to being raised by other strong, intelligent females as well as having the inner drive and determination to work hard and challenge expectations. She explained:

They allowed me to be myself and they taught me how to respect authority and to listen to my elders and to listen before I spoke. ... They said, you need to listen, form an opinion, be yourself and fight for what is right.

Her fight became one that challenged other educators to raise expectations for children of color. Her life's work has been to create equitable support systems that meet the needs of *all* children in order to provide quality instruction. She has a reputation of challenging assumptions foundational to the systems and structures of education.

As a black, female superintendent, Blake followed a white, male superintendent who had risen through the ranks within the system. She was faced with arising to the initial challenge of establishing her leadership role as well as defying gender and racial stereotypes that were deeply embedded in the district and community. As an accomplished curriculum leader who viewed education through the lens of equity, she clearly identified areas of inequities within the structures of ECSD's organizational makeup. Blake anticipated and addressed these challenges through infusing issues of equity throughout the implementation of the strategic planning process.

Dr. Brooks. The consultant, Dr. Brooks, is a black male who was raised on a rural farm in North Carolina during the civil rights movement and struggle for social justice. He grew up acutely aware of the inequities inflicted on people of color as a result of racial discrimination. Brooks' personal attributes of being determined, highly intelligent, athletic, and charming have facilitated his successes in spite of the adversity he faced. Throughout his career in educational leadership, he has led through the lens of creating more equitable opportunities for those that have historically been marginalized. There were many times when Dr. Brooks applied his experiences and perspective to shape the strategic planning process. As an example, Dr. Brooks was raised to appreciate reading and learning. It was an expectation which shaped his worldview of how children should be educated and the opportunities they need to be successful, especially children of poverty. He applied his personal experiences and perspective during ECSD's process by championing change to the early education program and promoting his belief that the early years in a child's learning and development are foundational to their future learning success.

Just as I brought my identity and positionality to this research, each of these individuals brought their identity and positionality to the strategic planning process. And while cultural norms prevent us from approaching uncomfortable subjects such as equity, race, and gender, I believe it is imperative that these topics be connected to the process of strategic planning.

Using the Strategic Planning Process to Advance Educational Equity

The strategic planning process has the potential to be nothing more than following the steps to assembling a lawnmower. However, if used with fidelity and critical consciousness, the process can prove to be transformational to district leadership and student lives. The strategic planning process gave these superintendents and consultant the opportunity to raise issues of equity, bringing them to the forefront of discussions. It also provided the opportunity to connect and create relationships with constituencies within the district that was essential to moving their agenda forward. Starting conversations about inequities in schools and communities can lead to a greater awareness and understanding of what district members value as well as what is devalued. ECSD did this by introducing discussions around district trend data that reflected issues of equity such as examining subgroup and discipline referral data as well as looking at the structures of advanced placement and academically intellectually gifted programs. With racism so deeply entrenched in our culture, it cannot be assumed that those who benefit from the powerful systems of privilege that have been built on race will easily change or even desire to change their perceptions of inequity and the institutionalized racism. That being said, the purpose of the strategic planning process is to highlight ways in which the district can improve by defining purpose, vision, goals, and strategies. If topics such as these are not discussed, deep rooted inequities will never be recognized and the core purpose of education will continue to fail at its mission of teaching and learning for *ALL* children, regardless of race or gender.

Conclusion

This study examined how incoming superintendents used the strategic planning process as a playbook for establishing organizational expectations, changing conversations, and removing barriers upon transition into the leadership role. Additionally, it revealed how each superintendent's leadership was influenced by the social and political contexts of their respective districts and how strategic planning aided in organizational evaluation. That is, the process helped them to assess internal and external environments, participants, and issues in order to develop conditions for change.

The superintendents for this study came into their new communities as outsiders. They used the strategic planning process to address challenges and facilitate change while establishing new administrations. The process proved to be an essential element in helping them to learn about their schools and community. It incorporated forums that brought about perspective, created conversations around the district's purpose, and built bridges and relationships with community stakeholders. Listening and learning from groups of stakeholders about the culture of the community was critical to their start.

Superintendent Legacies

Although Miller and Blake possess very different leadership styles, both are credited with having a transformational impact on their districts that came from their drive for success and core belief in the value of education for all children. This mindset gave them the ability to overcome obstacles, seize opportunities, and promote new ideas that shook up the old order that had locked their districts into one path for so long.

Interviewees credited Dr. Miller for taking CCSD from a *system of schools* to a *school system* by establishing centralized expectations and priorities. Her work focused on increasing literacy by creating learning environments that integrate high levels of engagement and collaboration. She is also recognized for being instrumental in marketing the innovative works of CCSD and differentiating it from other North Carolina districts.

Dr. Blake's legacy was one of creating an awareness and common language around issues of equity which had been a longstanding problem for the district. Participants not only spoke about the opposition Blake faced from the most privileged sectors of the community when she instituted changes that leveled the educational playing field; they also credited her building a foundation for change around instructional practices that benefited *all* children. I viewed Dr. Blake's ultimate legacy as one that gave a voice to those who didn't have one.

Scholars of succession and transition have long recognized the legacy of leadership and its power for influencing the succeeding leader's chances for success or failure (Hargreaves, 2005; Hargreaves and Fink, 2003). Reflecting on this research, both superintendents came into situations where multiple battles were unfolding inside and outside of the organizations they were to lead. Although the strategic planning process assisted in laying the groundwork for the superintendents' new administrations, the process was not used exclusively for the purpose of establishing new administrations. It was also used to correct course and address daunting levels of organizational dysfunction. While the study pointed to the merits of implementing a strategic planning process upon transition into a new superintendency, it also highlighted areas for further research.

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APPENDIX A

MATRIX: SUPERINTENDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

SUPERINTENDENT	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS				
	Pre-Arrival	Successor Entry	Post-Arrival Transition	Strategic Planning Process	Incorporation
#1 What are specific challenges faced by incoming superintendents upon entry and transition into an established organization?	<p>It's often reported that school boards have a set of expectations for a new superintendent. Did the school board have expectations or mandates for you to accomplish upon your arrival?</p> <p>Can you describe the previous superintendent's administration and how it influenced your arrival and transition experiences?</p>	<p>How did you plan for your entry into the superintendency?</p> <p>As an outsider coming into the organization, how would you describe your experiences entering the district?</p>	<p>Prior to implementing the strategic planning process, did you consider how it would impact your transition into this position?</p>		<p>What perspectives do superintendents, new to the district, have about their roles during their first year?</p> <p>Can you describe ways in which the strategic planning process has influenced your new administration?</p> <p>Based on your experiences, would you recommend to other newly appointed superintendents the use of a strategic planning process?</p>

SUPERINTENDENT	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS				
	Pre-Arrival	Successor Entry	Post-Arrival Transition	Strategic Planning Process	Incorporation
#2 How do school superintendents/administration regard their experiences with the strategic planning process as a vehicle to introduce organizational change and expectations?	<p>What strategies do superintendents, new to the district, employ in order to become acclimated to the surrounding culture, values and behaviors?</p>	<p>What made you decide to implement the strategic planning process with Dr. Brooks?</p>		<p>In retrospect, how helpful was the SP process to you during your entry in the superintendency?</p>	<p>Looking back on your entry experience and thinking about the specific challenges you faced, how influential was the SP process to you in overcoming some of the challenges you've described?</p>

SUPERINTENDENT	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS				
	Pre-Arrival	Successor Entry	Post-Arrival Transition	Strategic Planning Process	Incorporation
<p>#3</p> <p>How did the unique characteristics of the district impact the facilitation and success of the goals set forth from the strategic plan?</p>	<p>What did you perceive to be your greatest challenge coming into this position?</p> <p>What was the school district like when you were hired?</p>		<p>How has the strategic planning process been used to assist in the new administration's transition and gain stakeholder support?</p>	<p>What did you learn about the established culture of your new district as a result of the strategic planning process?</p>	<p>What impact did the implementation of the strategic planning process have on the district?</p>

BOARD Specific ?'s	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS				
COMMITTEE / General ?'s					
CONSULTANT Specific ?'s					
Highlighted questions were asked specific to participant role, while non-highlighted questions were asked of all participants	Pre-Arrival	Successor Entry	Post-Arrival Transition	Strategic Planning Process	Incorporation
RESEARCH QUESTIONS					
#4					In what ways has the district/board leveraged the strategic plan since its district adoption?
<p>What are specific examples of change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan?</p> <p>How have the changes been perceived?</p>			<p>To what degree did the strategic planning process play a role in the merging the established organizational culture with new expectations?</p>	<p>Can you talk about any unexpected consequences or challenges the district faced as a result of the strategic planning process?</p>	<p>Has the strategic plan had an impact on board decision making processes?</p>

APPENDIX B

MATRIX: COMMITTEE MEMBER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

BOARD Specific ?'s	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS				
COMMITTEE / General ?'s					
CONSULTANT Specific ?'s					
Highlighted questions were asked specific to participant role, while non-highlighted questions were asked of all participants	Pre-Arrival	Successor Entry	Post-Arrival Transition	Strategic Planning Process	Incorporation
RESEARCH QUESTIONS					
#1	What was the board's process for conducting a superintendent search?	Can you describe the superintendent's leadership characteristics?			Reflecting on the superintendent's first year in the district, what are your thoughts?
What are specific challenges faced by incoming superintendents upon entry and transition into an established organization?	Did the school board have expectations or mandates for the new superintendent to accomplish upon their arrival?	As an outsider coming into the organization, what were some challenges the superintendent faced entering the district?		Can you discuss other superintendents you've helped who have implemented the SP upon arrival into a district?	Can you describe ways in which the strategic planning process has influenced this administration?
	Can you describe the previous superintendent's administration and how it influenced the board's expectations for the new superintendent?	What was your perspective of each superintendent's entry experiences?			Can you compare and contrast the outcomes for each district?
	What is your professional relationship with each superintendent and how did you get involved as a facilitator for the process?				

BOARD Specific ?'s	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS				
COMMITTEE / General ?'s					
CONSULTANT Specific ?'s					
Highlighted questions were asked specific to participant role, while non-highlighted questions were asked of all participants	Pre-Arrival	Successor Entry	Post-Arrival Transition	Strategic Planning Process	Incorporation
RESEARCH QUESTIONS					
#2					
How do school superintendents/administration regard their experiences with the strategic planning process as a vehicle to introduce organizational change and expectations?	Was there a strategic plan in place prior to the new superintendent's arrival?	How did you plan for the strategic planning process and it's organization?		Describe your experiences with the strategic planning process facilitated by Dr. Brooks.	In retrospect, how helpful was the strategic planning process in establishing the new administration and serving as a vehicle for change?

BOARD Specific ?'s	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS				
COMMITTEE / General ?'s					
CONSULTANT Specific ?'s					
Highlighted questions were asked specific to participant role, while non-highlighted questions were asked of all participants	Pre-Arrival	Successor Entry	Post-Arrival Transition	Strategic Planning Process	Incorporation
RESEARCH QUESTIONS					
#3	What did you perceive to be your greatest challenge coming into this position?			Can you compare/contrast each district's plan?	
How did the unique characteristics of the district impact the facilitation and success of the goals set forth from the strategic plan?	What was the school district like when you became a member of the board?		How has the strategic planning process been used to assist in the new administration's transition and gain stakeholder support?	Can you talk about the strategic planning process in regards to its influence on the organization's established culture?	What impact did the implementation of the strategic planning process have on the district?

BOARD Specific ?'s	CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS				
COMMITTEE / General ?'s					
CONSULTANT Specific ?'s					
Highlighted questions were asked specific to participant role, while non-highlighted questions were asked of all participants	Pre-Arrival	Successor Entry	Post-Arrival Transition	Strategic Planning Process	Incorporation
RESEARCH QUESTIONS					
#4					In what ways has the district/board leveraged the strategic plan since its district adoption?
What are specific examples of change associated with the goals outlined in the strategic plan? How have the changes been perceived?			To what degree did the strategic planning process play a role in the merging the established organizational culture with new expectations?	Can you talk about any unexpected consequences or challenges the district faced as a result of the strategic planning process?	Has the strategic plan had an impact on board decision making processes?

APPENDIX C

LISTING OF CODING, CATEGORIES, THEMES

CODING	
1	ECSD Tracking Kids
2	A priori: Bureaucratic Structures
3	Bureaucratic Structures - ECSD
4	Bureaucratic Structures - CCSD
5	A priori: Challenges
6	Challenges - ECSD Achievement Gap
7	Challenges - ECSD AIG Program
8	Challenges - ECSD Change Res ADULT
9	Challenges - ECSD Communication
10	Challenges - ECSD Confusion in Expectations
11	Challenges - ECSD District Change
12	Challenges - ECSD Early Childhood
13	Challenges - ECSD Equity
14	Challenges - ECSD Lack of Cohesion/Structure
15	Challenges - ECSD Leadership Stability
16	Challenges - ECSD Magnets
17	Challenges - ECSD Mental Health
18	Challenges - ECSD Perception
19	Challenges - CCSD Accountability and School Performance
20	Challenges - CCSD Building WEF Controversy
21	Challenges - CCSD Change Too Much Too Fast
22	Challenges - CCSD Communication
23	Challenges - CCSD Communication Disconnect
24	Challenges - CCSD District Change
25	Challenges - CCSD Leadership Structures
26	Challenges - CCSD Leadership Structures
27	Challenges - CCSD Low Performance
28	Challenges - CCSD S Pushback
29	Challenges - CCSD Sustaining Momentum
30	Challenges - CCSD Transparency
31	Challenges - CCSD Working in Silo
32	A priori: Consultant Role
33	A priori: District - Culture & Dynamics
34	District - ECSD Previous Leadership
35	District - ECSD Previous Leadership - Burn it Down
36	District - CCSD Conflict Closing Schools
37	District - CCSD Governmental Structures
38	District - CCSD Desire for Improvement/Change
39	District - CCSD Board Superintendent Relations
40	District - CCSD Previous Leadership
41	District - CCSD Turnover
42	District - System of Schools or
43	A priori: District Successes
44	Perceptions - CCSD Reflections on District Change
45	A priori: Previous Leadership
46	A priori: Relationships
47	Relationships - ECSD Building
48	Relationships - ECSD CO and Schools
49	Relationships - ECSD Shared Vision
50	Relationships - ECSD Supportive
51	Relationships - ECSD Trust
52	Relationships - CCSD Building
53	Relationships - CCSD CO and Schools
54	Relationships - CCSD Conflict
55	Relationships - CCSD Shared Vision
56	Relationships - CCSD Trust
57	A priori: S Leadership
58	A priori: S Change Agent
59	S Departure - ECSD
60	S Departure - CCSD Grissom
61	S Hiring - CCSD Seasoned Vet
62	S Hiring / Arrival - CCSD
63	S Hiring Process - ECSD Successor
64	S Hiring Process - CCSD BOE Expectations
65	S Hiring Process ECSD
66	S Hiring Process ECSD BOE Expectations
67	S Impact on District - ECSD
68	S Impact on District - CCSD
69	S Leadership - ECSD Direct Conversations
70	S Leadership - Lack of Historical Perspective
71	S Leadership Succession ECSD
72	S Leadership Succession CCSD
73	S Leadership Traits - ECSD Blake
74	S Leadership Traits - ECSD Post-Blake
75	S Leadership Traits - CCSD Comparison
76	S Leadership Traits - CCSD Garland
77	S Leadership Traits - CCSD Miller
78	S Leadership Traits ECSD Comparison
79	S on Factors for Success CCSD
80	S Transition Debrief With Each Other
81	S Transition Phase - ECSD Interim
82	S Transition Phase - CCSD Interim?
83	S Transition Phase ECSD
84	S Transition Phase CCSD
85	A priori: Strategic Plan
86	Strategic Plan - ECSD Early Childhood
87	Strategic Plan - ECSD Living Doc
88	Strategic Plan - ECSD Measurement of Success
89	Strategic Plan - ECSD New Admin Expectations
90	Strategic Plan - ECSD Perceptions
91	Strategic Plan - ECSD Process
92	Strategic Plan - ECSD Pushback
93	Strategic Plan - ECSD Whole Child
94	Strategic Plan - Pre-Determined Outcomes
95	Strategic Plan - Prior??
96	Strategic Plan - CCSD Board Support
97	Strategic Plan - CCSD Est Consistency
98	Strategic Plan - CCSD Literacy
99	Strategic Plan - CCSD Living Document
100	Strategic Plan - CCSD Measurement of Success
101	Strategic Plan - CCSD Perceptions
102	Strategic Plan - CCSD Process
103	Strategic Plan - CCSD Rebranding
104	Strategic Plan - CCSD Symbolic Change CO
105	Strategic Plan - CCSD Technology 1:1
106	Strategic Plan - CCSD Vehicle for New Admin